The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces after the Cold War,

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Recommended Citation
O’Hanlon’s general projections of future technologies appear reasonable. Yet the reader would be more assured of the author’s conclusions if his technical evaluations did not rely so heavily upon articles in newspapers and popular periodicals. One can be justifiably skeptical that information drawn from Army Times, Defense News, or even Aviation Week & Space Technology fully reflects the broad range of scientific research and development throughout government, industry, and academia, both in the United States and abroad. Likewise, O’Hanlon’s general dismissal of the future military challenges posed by China, Russia, and North Korea is somewhat cavalier. It would have been useful had O’Hanlon made clear his personal qualifications to provide an authoritative evaluation of such a wide range of technology projections and foreign military developments. He states that he presented his findings to “a number of weapons scientists and technology experts,” but he does not identify them or indicate whether they agreed with his conclusions.

O’Hanlon uses his projections of future technology as the basis for a modernization strategy that is intended to promote “defense innovation” without increasing the defense budget. He proposes major reductions, up to two-thirds in such “expensive next generation platforms” as the F-22 and F/A-18E/F, in order to fund improvements to existing systems and a broad range of initiatives in research, development, and experimentation. However, most of his recommendations tend to be as vague as the assumptions he is challenging. For instance, O’Hanlon approves of the acquisition of “new fleets of unmanned aerial vehicles,” because it “appear[s] generally sensible.” He states that up to two billion dollars a year might be needed to outfit combat units with “internet capabilities” but does not make clear whether he is referring to the commercial Internet, classified information networks, or some other type of equipment-interoperability initiative. Likewise, he makes a broad plea for the military to “avoid service parochialism and foster jointness” but does not elaborate on how best to balance the advantages of organizational unity (as distinguished from systems interoperability) against the important contribution of interservice competition to the process of military innovation.

O’Hanlon’s basic thesis is certainly valid. As he points out, the fact that none of the military services has actually committed to major changes in its force structures, operational concepts, or organizations is evidence in itself that proponents of innovation have yet to articulate a compelling argument for a very different U.S. military. This book is far from the final word on military technology and transformation, but it may serve to stimulate the proponents of major change to engage in a more detailed debate.

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Ask a soldier or military analyst to describe the “postmodern military,” and you are likely to get an answer that includes high technology, precision weapons, information operations, and possibly (especially if he or she is associated with the Navy) network-centric warfare. Much of the recent literature on military affairs
concentrates on these technology issues, and an observer might be forgiven for believing that such operational and technical differences are what separate twenty-first-century military forces from their predecessors. This collection of essays describing the current state of military affairs in the United States and twelve other Western-oriented democracies takes a very different and welcome approach. The editors, well-known authorities in the fields of military sociology and civil-military relations, examine the nature of post–Cold War militaries from the point of view of how military forces are organized and how they relate to civilian society. Some of the issues raised will be familiar to anyone who has followed the debate in recent years over a possible crisis in civil-military relations in America. This book, however, goes well beyond that issue to posit a general model of how militaries in Western democracies are changing in the post–Cold War world. As distinct from the “modern” military organization, which the authors trace from the French Revolution to the end of World War II, and the “Late Modern” military that prevailed from 1945 to the end of the Cold War, the “postmodern” military is described as one in which military forces undergo a loosening of ties with the nation-state. Postmodern military forces are characterized by an erosion of traditional martial values, a decrease in their sense of an identity separate from civil society, and a change of purpose from fighting wars to nontraditional missions, often involving, or authorized by, international and multinational entities. Kosovo is described as “the first Postmodern war,” while the Gulf War, involving a conventional military invasion and state against state conflict, is seen as a “throwback” to the late-modern (Cold War) era. On the basis primarily of the American experience, the editors describe trends in postmodern militaries, including several hot-button topics. What are the missions of militaries today? What is the relationship between the military and the media, and what is the public attitude toward the military? How fully are women and homosexuals to be incorporated? The virtue of this book is that it is not just another rehash of the arguments concerning familiar issues. The essays, all by prominent sociologists, review how well militaries in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom reflect the postmodern model. The essays thus provide useful overviews of how those countries are adapting to many of the same forces that are shaping the American military. They may provide cautionary lessons for military officials and decision makers in the United States by underscoring, for instance, how terribly wrong things can go in “military operations other than war.” In one extreme example of modern military disaster, the Dutch military still has not fully recovered from the failure of the Dutch 3d Air Mobile Battalion to defend the “safe area” of Srebrenica, Bosnia, in 1995. Bosnian Serb forces massacred thousands of Bosnian Muslims after the Dutch battalion allowed itself to be disarmed. At the other extreme, members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment deployed to Somalia in 1993 were later found to have tortured and murdered at least one Somali youth who had tried to infiltrate their camp to steal. Investigations revealed other abuses by the regiment, and eventually it was disbanded.
These examples underscore the challenges involved in postmodern military missions, and they may support the arguments of those who believe it is dangerous, if not impossible, to expect war-fighting troops to conduct “other than war” missions.

The limitation of this collection of essays is that it does not address the militaries of greatest interest to American military officers—those of potential adversaries to the United States. Because the editors are specifically proposing a theoretical model of how Western, democratic militaries are adjusting to a world with a dramatically reduced conventional threat, the reader must look elsewhere to discover whether or not such nations as China are experiencing the same trends.

Yet there is a great deal here to challenge those worried about the state of America’s military today, especially concerning social issues. One of the most interesting insights concerns the levels of integration of women and homosexuals in the American military, compared with the other countries surveyed. The case studies show that the United States is farther along than most in integrating women but lags behind the postmodern norm in allowing open homosexuals into its ranks.

The essay on Israel, for example, points out that the common perception of the “woman warrior” in the Israeli Defense Force is a myth. Although many women played active fighting roles in the Israeli war of independence, women today are less fully integrated into the IDF than in most other Western militaries.

On the subject of homosexuals, the success of Canada is cited as a possible guide for other nations. Homosexuals have been able to serve openly in the Canadian Forces since 1992, and the removal of previous restrictions is described as having had “virtually no negative impact” on such matters as recruitment, retention, and morale. It is not clear if the Canadian experience is directly applicable to the United States, but the book suggests that perhaps it is. One of the editors writes that “if the full acceptance of openly homosexual service members is only a matter of time, given the increased tolerance for diversity of sexual orientation among the general population, it would be advisable for policy makers in countries where this is true to move beyond wishful thinking or abhorrence and consider how such a transition can be made with minimal negative impact on group cohesion and military effectiveness.”

Of course, case studies from other countries may do little to persuade those who have already made up their minds. The decision of Canadian Forces authorities in 1998 to approve financial support for a service member’s sex-change operation, for example, may provide ammunition for both sides in that particular debate. Whether or not the Canadian example is one to be feared or applauded, it does suggest how important it is to study closely the development of the postmodern military.

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Ah, ecstasy! A benign world for the next two decades. Power politics disappear. America leads the drawdown, with Russia following to achieve parity with China, Britain, and France at about two hundred nuclear weapons. Worldwide nuclear