

2019

Selling War: A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine

Richard J. Norton

Steven J. Alvarez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard J. and Alvarez, Steven J. (2019) "Selling War: A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 72 : No. 1 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol72/iss1/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Bonadonna also cautions that humanitarian interventions require subtlety in the conduct of nonkinetic operations. Whatever the multinational solutions are to the humanitarian crisis, coalition forces must treat the endemic political and social causes, not only the outward symptoms of human suffering. Furthermore, transnational forces should be sensitive to the anthropological customs and sociological systems that have cultural meaning and historical value for the indigenous society being helped.

With those caveats articulated, Bonadonna expresses the viewpoint that the military will continue HA operations because of its organic medical and security capabilities and the mobile and mission-ready assets it has available for rapid deployment. Bonadonna concludes that humanitarian operations at their best exemplify the central goals of the military profession through the maintenance of global stability and the protection of human rights. The altruistic ethics of HA underscores the eminent value of nonkinetic missions that foster and protect the common dignity of every man, woman, and child, befitting the highest standards of human flourishing.

Although *Soldiers and Civilization* may be criticized for what is not included in this ambitious historical undertaking, the reader undoubtedly will be enriched by this intellectual journey from classical antiquity to postmodernity. Warfighter and policy maker alike will encounter the larger-than-life personae of legendary heroes such as Ulysses, Alexander the Great, and Charlemagne—to name only a few—accompanied by a keen analysis of their strategies, operations, and tactics. For example, the game of chess may seem like a harmless pursuit passed benignly

from one generation to the next, but Bonadonna reveals how the game that once embodied medieval strategy and feudal society eventually evolved into the Prussian *Kriegsspiel* (war game) in the nineteenth century for the Prussian general staff. Here and in many other places, Bonadonna introduces profound insights worthy of serious consideration, and in so doing distinguishes himself as an exceptional historian, military strategist, and ethicist. The coverage of military history and civilization in the East would prove an excellent sequel to this outstanding overview of military professionalism in Western civilization. Suffice it to say, *Soldiers and Civilization* is a significant addition to the study of war fighting as the basis for the literature, culture, and politics of Western civilization.

EDWARD ERWIN



Selling War: A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine, by Steven J. Alvarez. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2016. 384 pages. \$34.95.

Selling War is a mixed bag. Like the proverbial description of the North Platte River, it is simultaneously “too thick to drink and too thin to plow.” Steven Alvarez, an experienced former Army public affairs officer (PAO), suggests as much when he describes his work as “part memoir, part public relations handbook, part after-action review, part white paper, part catharsis, and a firsthand account of [his] yearlong mobilization” in Iraq from 2004 to 2005 (p. xxi). The result does partial justice to each of these perspectives, but full justice to none.

Alvarez is a severe critic of Army public affairs. He convincingly appraises the

public affairs efforts of both the military and the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq as colossal failures. These failures are all the more painful given that Alvarez was able to produce limited successes that pointed to what might have been. For example, the authorities' refusal to engage the Arab press, most notably Al Jazeera, created lost opportunities; in contrast, Alvarez's work with the Saudi television channel Al Arabiya was so successful that insurgents killed its personnel when they presented factual stories pointing out coalition successes.

Selling War is indeed part memoir and, clearly, part catharsis. Alvarez, a former enlisted soldier and then a commissioned line officer, is painfully aware of the difference between the lifestyle he experienced and that of frontline soldiers and Marines. His writing indicates a personal level of conflict when he contemplates not only how much easier his life was than theirs but also the even easier lives of other Army personnel and their civilian counterparts assigned to duties in Baghdad's Green Zone. Further, Alvarez does not shy away from telling of actions that place him in a less-than-flattering light. He takes responsibility for programs that went wrong and ideas that went astray. He admits to participating behind the scenes to get an immediate superior removed.

However, even as he often holds himself accountable for failure, he is equally or more scathing when looking at the failings of others. Alvarez's assignment involved working extensively with Iraqi officials, and he details the frustration of working within a system pervaded by nepotism and corruption. Yet Alvarez also is very sensitive to the plight of Iraqis who sincerely worked to better the country and the lives of its citizens.

Alvarez's account raises the very real question whether the shortcomings of the Iraqi government were so great as to prevent the United States from achieving its victory objectives. In Alvarez's experience, the rare Iraqi individual who worked for the greater good was so massively outnumbered by those who worked only for themselves that failure to reach the Iraqi ideal was guaranteed.

Alvarez served as General David Petraeus's PAO, and contends that the general understood, better than many, the value of communication in counterinsurgency operations. Alvarez praises Petraeus as a natural PAO and gifted communicator. He assiduously refrains from claiming credit for Petraeus's ideas on communication and counterinsurgency; however, Alvarez points out that he was developing and putting into effect many of the practices that Petraeus eventually turned into policy and doctrine.

From his service with Petraeus, Alvarez is able to provide a unique view of the man. Alvarez also discusses his interaction with noteworthy journalists, ranging from Christiane Amanpour, Dan Rather, and Peter Jennings to Geraldo Rivera. Somewhat surprisingly, the senior representatives of the fourth estate come off well, especially in the case of Rivera. As Alvarez tells stories of his personal experiences with these journalistic legends, he mounts a passionate argument that dealing with reporters in an openhanded way will serve the military far better than keeping them at arm's length and treating them as little better than the enemy.

This is not a scholarly work, nor is it intended to be, and there are issues pertaining to style and tone. Words and phrasing are as much Alvarez's tools as the plumber's pipe wrench or the

mathematician's calculator. Word choice is deliberate and made with intent. Thus, when Alvarez lavishly employs profanity, obscenity, and testosterone-laden invective, it is natural to ask why and to what desired effect. The author is no longer a salty sergeant or a junior officer of limited erudition and expression; to the contrary, he is a professional wordsmith, valued for his ability to paint a picture and explain an idea with words. One presumes the intent was for the reader to perceive the author as a fighting man with a pen, but the practice detracts from a persona as a coolly analytical observer and participant whose recommendations are rooted in rationality.

Perhaps this dichotomy reflects the actual experience of the U.S. communication effort in Iraq. Alvarez clearly cared about succeeding there. He employed creative methods and pursued avidly those that produced positive results. At the same time, he encountered organizational timidity, a lack of professionalism in his field, venality and indifference from many of his counterparts, and failure. Perhaps, under such conditions, frustration and invective are all that ever remains.

RICHARD J. NORTON

OUR REVIEWERS

Jeffrey Biller is a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force and a military professor in the Stockton Center for International Law at the Naval War College. The Stockton Center is the world's premier research institute for the study of international law and military operations throughout the land, sea, aerospace, and cyberspace domains. Stockton Center faculty teach in the core curriculum and electives at the Naval War College, as well as in advanced international law courses around the world.

Blake I. Campbell is an independent researcher, reviewer, book review editor, and adjunct professor.

Edward Erwin is a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy and a chaplain who holds a PhD in theology and ethics from Duke University. Erwin has taught courses in world religions at Troy University and in ethics at the University of Maryland University College. He has written a number of articles for leading academic journals and professional magazines.

John B. Hattendorf is the Ernest J. King Professor Emeritus of Maritime History at the Naval War College. He is the author, coauthor, editor, or coeditor of more than forty books on British and American maritime history and naval warfare.

James P. McGrath III, Captain, USN, a nuclear-trained surface warfare officer, is currently a military professor of joint military operations at the Naval War College. He received a bachelor of arts in history from Virginia Tech and a master of arts in military history from Norwich University, and is a distinguished graduate of the Naval War College. He commanded Maritime Expeditionary Squadron 7 and has served on the staffs of the Seventh Fleet and European Command, as well as the Joint Staff.