

History 211 US Military History Discussion Transcript for January 28, 2021

Main Reading: essay by Antulio Echevarria

The initial reading assignment in this class describes a scholarly debate that emerged after the publication in 1973 of a work by military historian Russell Weigley called, *The American Way of War*. Echevarria describes how Weigley and some of his critics have explained the evolution of American war-fighting strategies, while pointing out how some of the problems they have raised—especially concerning the disconnection between politics and strategy (which is the opposite of the classic maxim from Clausewitz)—have continued to affect and often impair American strategic thinking. The following selections come from student comments

ARGUMENT OVERVIEW

STUDENT COMMENT: In *Toward an American Way of War*, author Antulio Echevarria writes about the “American way of war,” defining it as viewing conflict through “holistic” a lens (iii). To further elaborate, he cites Russell Weigley’s *The American Way of War*, in which he examines early American interpretations that [centered] on the pursuit of a crushing military victory—over an adversary.” As opposed to other European forces, Weigley’s perspective views the annihilation of one’s opponent as “an alternative to bargaining” (1). As the foundational ideas and expectations of war, there exists overlapping ideas between different interpretations of the way of war. In Germany, for example, Prusso-German General Helmuth von Moltke once argued that policy cannot interfere with military operations. Although his ideas were prominent during his time in power, similar way of thought can be found in British and French literature written during the late 20th century. Although Echevarria provides succinct contextual information regarding the European way of war, he critiques the American interpretation, arguing that steps to “diminish American strategic thinking” should be taken into account and military leaders must turn combat victory into strategic outcomes (16-17). As opposed to the current American way of war—which “focuses primarily on defeating the enemy in battle”—Echevarria invites us to reinterpret what the way of war used to mean, and how it has shaped the way Americans view war as an alternative to political conflict.

STUDENT COMMENT: Throughout Antulio Echevarria’s piece, “Toward an American Way of War,” he highlights the several differences between “winning battles” and “winning wars” which are often misconstrued into appearing equivalent. In the piece, Echevarria notes how historian, Russell Weigley and Author of the book *Savage Wars of Peace*, Max Boot, two theorists who have differing ideas on American military operations, both seemed to agree that “the American way of war tends to shy away from thinking about the complicated process of turning military triumphs...into strategic successes.” (7) They claim that this is the result of “bifurcation” that originates from American ideals which divides policy makers and the military when it comes to wars. In a war, the position of each is debatable with some theorists in Echevarria’s piece arguing that policy makers should stay away and let the military handle wars while others assert that war efforts should be split between the two to get better results. This

imbalance has in part led to the issues between winning battles and wars. The military's job is to fight the battles brought forth in a war but it is the policy maker's job to ensure that the battles are not fought for nothing and a battle victory is translated into a strategic victory. The best example of this would be the conversation of U.S. Army Colonel Harry Summers' conversation with a North Vietnamese Army colonel after the Vietnam war. Echevarria makes note of "the fact that the NVA had never defeated U.S. forces on the field of battle" which would appear to be a major failure in military strategy. (10) Despite this, the NVA was eventually successful in the capture of the entire nation of Vietnam. Summers asserts that the reason this is the case was the "U.S. political leadership failed to do its [part]" while the soldiers fought which prevented our battles won from counting strategically. The emphasis on policy makers and military not working synchronously is echoed throughout Echevarria's writing. The military can win battles but will never come close to winning the overarching war if the policy makers fail to make use of what is gained. If a war is to be fought, the military relies on policy makers to support the costs of said war and not let alternative logics compete with a centralized goal. While we struggle with the balance between the political and military arms of our American way of war, we continue to fill out history books with the shortcomings and failures brought about by the lack of coordination between the two. As our war machine grows and changes, Echevarria asserts that the military and political leaders must clearly define their roles in a conflict to get the best out of both and reach a strategic victory opposed to a laundry list of valiantly fought battles that end in a failure of accomplishment.

WAY OF BATTLE

STUDENT COMMENT: Echevarria is using arguments made by previous military scholars to demonstrate that the way the United States goes about waging wars isn't a "Way of War" but, only a "Way of Battle". Echevarria says this is an important distinction because "the American way of war tends to shy away from thinking about the complicated process of turning military triumphs, whether on the scale of major campaigns or small-unit actions, into strategic successes." (vii) but, then later in the article he argues that this is representative of the fact that the American way of war hasn't really developed from a way of battle. Echevarria poses all sorts of reasons for this, pulling evidence from many military scholars, but he suggests that if the U.S. is to truly move towards a way of war they need to "better define the respective roles and responsibilities of the logic and grammar of war, and, in the process, take steps that will diminish the bifurcation in American strategic thinking" (16) and "political and military leaders must habituate themselves to thinking more thoroughly about how to turn combat successes into favorable strategic outcomes." (17).

STUDENT COMMENT: This article focuses on the definition of "the way of war," how it has changed and stayed the same over time. However, Echevarria does not necessarily agree or believe that the way of war really exists outside of the name itself because America's approach to war was more a way of battle rather than a way of war. The early on way of war mainly focused on the pursuit of a crushing military victory either through strategy of attrition or one of annihilation. Way of war early on associated grand strategy with policy, and while policies had the right to establish goals of conflict, it was not allowed to interfere with conduct of

military operations. At the time logic/knowledge of war was important, but that it was more important to focus on its grammar during the actual fighting. A grammarian approach to war was believed in and accepted rather than of a view of policy and war as a continuum. However, ideas shifted a little bit after Operation DESERT STORM and really gained momentum during the 1990s. This new style of warfare focused more on finding a way of war that was quicker, cost efficient, and resulted in fewer casualties, but the biggest difference was its emphasis of jointness and knowledge.

POLITICIANS AND GENERALS

STUDENT COMMENT: Much like international politics, the doctrines and strategies employed in waging war can be categorized into unique paradigms. As Echevarria makes clear, the United States military is an internally conflicted organization. While those guiding foreign policy may see war as a continuation of policy, along the lines of Clausewitz, the actual military leadership guiding the armed forces has a much different view of the intentions of American fighting forces. Interstate conflict on a global scale has reduced over the past seventy years, following the Second World War, but smaller interactions between substate actors and relatively minor conflicts have highlighted the strategic shortcomings of the American military. Repeatedly cited author Moltke points out the vital differences between the impact of small-scale military operations and the pursuit of political goals through a “grand strategy.” One could contend that this separation of operations is perpetuated by US military leadership, which often felt politicians: “had no right to interfere with the conduct of military operations (Echevarria, 2).” This debate centers more around the role of civilian control of the military. A lack of cohesion between branches of government is not a new issue within American democracy, but its most glaring effects can be seen in America’s inability to adopt a central military doctrine. Without doctrine there is little clarity in the militaristic goals of government.

STUDENT COMMENT: In the case of the military leadership, in order to create success, combat itself cannot be viewed as the only measure to achieve a stated mission. Though the military is of course equipped to fight wars, it must be just as capable to endure and contribute to larger solutions aside from either attrition or annihilation of enemy forces and resources as Echevarria quotes Weigley. In other words, smaller successes in battles combined together do not equal a larger success in war. In more typical political language, tactical success must be a part of a larger political end in conjunction with policy. It would seem that this becomes troublesome considering the military's aspiration to remain an apolitical body in and of itself, and only carry out their part in policy as directed by civilian officials. In this case, it may require a new comfortability within the military to actively participate in a given political role rather than attempt to avoid confrontation with policy altogether.

PRESENT-DAY PROBLEMS

STUDENT COMMENT: After reading Echevarria's writing, I noticed an important concept that he was trying to point out. Echevarria wanted the reader to understand the shift in the American perspective on how we approach war and the ways in which the military should

define a victory. It was noted how the ideal victory or concept of victory in the eyes of many military strategists meant a complete domination of their enemy. This idea meant a full destruction of the opposition's military force and a storming of their capitol to symbolize an end of the conflict that was ongoing. However, Echevarria pointed out that in the most recent wars on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan have showed that there needed to be a shift in opinion within our military on the idea of victory. The author states, "The new American way of war appears to have misidentified the center of gravity in each of these campaigns, placing more emphasis on destroying enemy forces than securing population centers and critical infrastructure and maintaining order (Echevarria 13)." This idea was important to understand because these two countries lacked the critical necessities of resources and financial stability to institute a new form of government that could support their citizens while keeping domestic and foreign terrorism at bay.

STUDENT COMMENT: The most significant insight I recognized in *Toward an American Way of War* by Antulio Echevarria was that he believes America has a way of battle but has yet to develop a consistent way of war. The bifurcation of American warfighting that holds civilian authority above military command creates conflict between the "grammar and logic of war" (vii) creating difficulty "turning combat successes into favorable strategic outcomes" (vii). As the "New American Way of War" (7) focusses on speed and precision to achieve a quick and decisive victory, American political and military leaders must focus on treating victory in battle as a means rather than an end. To achieving long term objectives and win wars, increased focus should be place on post-conflict planning. Echevarria writes that "if the global war on terrorism and other strategic endeavors require the United States to intervene more frequently in failed and failing states, it will need more practical capability in nation building and stability and support operations to achieve its strategic aims." (18). An example presented of the disconnect between the way of battle and a way of war is Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the U.S. has seen success in battle, finding and destroying the enemy, but has struggled to achieve the strategic objectives of war, to create a stable and favorable government and economic system (18).

STUDENT COMMENT: Max Boot sees a need, with the large amount of U.S. military involvement across the world, to focus on, "precision firepower, special forces, psychological operations, and jointness" (Echevarria, pg. 8). This results in an ability to engage in conflict rapidly and will likely lead to success in the individual battle. While winning the battle is important, strategic success can only be won if there is a greater focus on nation building or the aftereffects of war. With the involvement of politicians, military leaders, and international organizations, the process of reconstruction is not easy and needs immense focus. Post 9/11, when discussing Afghanistan and Iraq, Antulio Echevarria states that, "planning for post-conflict operations was inadequate because the enemy in each case collapsed faster than expected" (Echevarria, pg. 13). The military failed to focus on the repercussions, and instead concentrated solely on the individual battles. The U.S. military needs to maintain the ideologies of Boot to win battles, but must go further in creating a full time force that focuses on rebuilding governments, educational institutions, and essential parts of nations that were demolished in battle, if they want to have actual strategic successes.