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Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: U.S. Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan*. Washington: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. ix, 219. ISBN 978-1-62616-139-9.

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In this book, historian Antulio J. Echevarria II<sup>1</sup> challenges “longstanding notions about the American way of war,” primarily in opposition to Russell Weigley’s classic study of the subject.<sup>2</sup> He argues that “its alleged apolitical and astrategic character and its reputation for using overwhelming force to achieve decisive results—do not, in fact, hold up to scrutiny” (1). Echevarria is not, of course, the first to challenge Weigley’s thesis over the past four decades.<sup>3</sup>

*Reconsidering the American Way of War* contains seven chapters. The first three delineate the debate about American war-making and survey the extensive relevant literature. Echevarria describes the use and misuse of the concept of “strategic culture” and suggests a more practical method of analyzing the American practice of war,<sup>4</sup> “defined for purposes of this study as how the United States used military force to protect and promote its interests” (3). He maintains that “Military practice is ... the sum of two things: military strategy and its supporting operations” (49). These definitions reduce complexity and make the author’s task more manageable.

The author highlights the enormous diversity in the American practice of war by moving from the three classic forms of strategy—attrition, exhaustion, annihilation—to a quartet of new ones: decapitation, coercive diplomacy, terror and intimidation, and deterrence.

Four chapters assess over two centuries of American military history, from the Revolution to recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Chapter 4 covers the period from 1775 to the Mexican War (1846–48); chapter 5 from the Civil War (1861–65) to the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901); chapter 6 from the Caribbean Wars<sup>5</sup> to the Korean War (1950–53); and chapter 7 from the Guatemalan Coup (1954) to the War on Terrorism (2001–14).

Echevarria concludes first that “the American way of war has been nothing less than political in every respect and in every period of its history” (164); second that “rather than being astrategic, American military practice drew from a great number of military strategies” (165); third that “the United States rarely employed overwhelming or decisive military force in its armed conflicts” (167); fourth that “Historically, America’s strategic center of gravity has rarely been the will of the public, contrary to conventional wisdom.... [P]residents from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush have acted according to what they believed was in the best interest of the United States ...” (173); fifth that “American strategic and operational practice rest,

1. The editor of the US Army War College Journal, *Parameter*, he has taught at the US Military Academy and is the author of several books, including *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2007) and *Imagining Future War: The West’s Technological Revolution and Visions of Wars to Come, 1880–1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).

2. *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (NY: Macmillan, 1973).

3. See, most notably, Brian McAllister Linn, “The American War of War Revisited,” *Journal of Military History* 66 (2002) 501–30, and *The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2007).

4. John Shy’s work should have been the starting point for this survey. See his 1971 essay “The American Military Experience: History and Learning,” rpt. in *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for Independence* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan Pr, 1976; rev. ed. 1990) 265–94, in which he asserts that “we are regarding American society as in some sense a living organism whose behavior reveals coherence and consistency, and which can be said to learn from and remember its military past” (272). Shy believes the paradigm for the American way of war is the American Revolution. Weigley believed it was the Civil War. Both think a consistent American conduct war could be revealed by studying past behaviors. See, also, Shy, “The Cultural Approach to the History of War,” *Journal of Military History* 57 (1993) 13–26.

5. Viz. Panama (1903), Cuba (1906–9), Nicaragua (1909–12), Haiti (1915–34), and the Dominican Republic (1916–24).

and has long rested, on the assumption that battlefield victories make for successful campaigns, which in turn lead to victorious wars” (174); and sixth that “this knowledge [of ways of war] does not permit us to predict what the American way of war will be in the next decade or even in the next half decade” (176).

Of these propositions, I take issue only with the fourth and sixth. The “strategic center of gravity” in the Vietnam War, which outlasted three presidents, was popular sentiment in the United States. The Nixon administration’s Vietnamization policy was a concession to the will of the American people. In the nation’s wars, both total and limited, the will of the people was significant until 1973, when the all-volunteer army came into existence—a professional fighting force that constituted just 1 percent of the US population. The American people were, for the most part, detached from the wars. As for predicting the nature of the American way of war, we may make some cautious near-term forecasts.

Though Echevarria has written a succinct and informative book full of insights into the US practice of war, he has tried to do two things in too brief a space: his survey of the literature on the American way of war in a mere seventeen pages does not do justice to the work of the more than twenty canvassed scholars. And a review of the American practice of war from Revolution to Operation Enduring Freedom in just over 100 pages is equally impracticable. (The Civil War gets seven pages, the Second World War three, the Korean War four, Vietnam five, etc.) Thus, for example, on World War II, Echevarria discusses Kasserine Pass, but not Midway; the submarine campaign in the Pacific, but not the Marine Corps’ central Pacific operations; the strategic bombing campaign, but not the Battle of the Atlantic.

A higher order criticism is that the author gives too little attention to the distinction between *offensive* and *defensive* strategies. Historically, American strategy has stressed offensive operations designed to end conflicts by taking enemy territory. However, the invention of nuclear weapons ushered the United States and the rest of the world into the Cold War, in essence a global, strategically defensive war against the spread of communism. In spring 1951, President Harry Truman stopped the advance of the US Army in Korea at the 38th Parallel, marking the commencement of a defensive war of attrition instead of a futile contest of arms against China. American popular support for the war quickly waned.

In Vietnam, for the first time in the history of the US Army, a ground war was fought entirely on the strategic defense. Since this made a comprehensive destruction of the North Vietnamese Army impossible, the Army and Marine Corps could only avoid losing the war. Air power, the only offensive means, could not break the will of the North Vietnamese communists. This protracted, defensive war of attrition ultimately destroyed the will of the American people to continue the war. The United States faced a similar strategic problem in waging President George W. Bush’s Global War on Terrorism in Afghanistan. As long as the enemy could disappear into ungoverned regions of Pakistan, American forces could not achieve victory. Air power, even with drone technologies, was not and could not be decisive.

Unfortunately, *Reconsidering the American Way of War* is bereft of maps. Strategy is, at least in part, a function of geography, and operations are functions of terrain. Analysis of either requires good maps. How otherwise is a reader to visualize, say, an “advance in three columns” (79)?

Antulio Echevarria II has written an excellent book for historians, military professionals, and others with a good grasp of the history of America’s wars. However, his concise survey of over two hundred years of American military strategy and operations will also be useful in college courses.<sup>6</sup>

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6. I have added it to the “Recommended Readings” for my course on the American way of war since World War II.