



*Elvis's Army: Cold War GIs and the Atomic Battlefield* by Bryan McAllistar Linn.

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The Vietnam War was in its final phase when conscription ended in 1973 in the face of growing protests and an increasingly untenable military situation in Southeast Asia. Besides distaste for the draft per se, there was increasing skepticism about the need to combat communist expansion. This was a time of reflection and reform for the US Army. Not for the first nor the last time, its leaders needed a more compelling reason to send the nation's youth to fight ground wars on the far side of the world.

The incredible destructive capacity of airpower had been demonstrated by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Airpower enthusiasts like generals Carl Spaatz and Curtis LeMay questioned the need to deploy land armies in an atomic age. Although many US military leaders during the late 1940s doggedly tried to convince policymakers of the need for robust ground forces, the Army shrank considerably.

Less than a year after the Soviet Union detonated a nuclear device for the first time, the North Korean People's Army invaded South Korea in June 1950. In the dawn of the era of "Mutually Assured Destruction," the drawbacks of a too air-centered deterrence force became clear. President Harry S. Truman's order up of US ground forces to stop the North Korean invasion required the Army to conscript more than a million men over three years. The war provided clear evidence that a sizeable ground force was necessary to fight conventional wars.

The draft continued for another twenty years after the Korean War. Some Army leaders claimed that it strengthened the moral fiber of the United States; others that conscription encouraged volunteers to enlist in the Army or to join Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs in college. The Army knew it must make clear to the American people—especially draft-age males—the benefits of military service. Conscription was seen as a means to that end. Moreover, the military had to redefine itself in the 1950s as a responsible steward of American tax dollars.

In *Elvis's Army*, historian Brian McAllister Linn (Texas A&M Univ.) explains how the Army as an organization met these challenges. He concentrates on the period between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of President John F. Kennedy's administration.

The Korean War had revealed the Army's lack of readiness. Military officials had hoped to make good their battlefield losses with volunteers, but too few men were enlisting. This led policymakers to look to conscription to solve their manpower problem. In this environment, the Pentagon had to lobby for resources to modernize the Army and ready it to fight on an atomic battlefield.

Linn shows that war in the atomic age required educated soldiers, men who would not respond well to the sort of discipline imposed in the pre-World War II Army. The 1950 Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) was meant to revamp the military's standards of discipline to conform with the perceived expectations of a peacetime society. But, in the event, Linn observes,

Both during and after the Korean War, military and civilian critics blamed postwar reforms, and especially the UCMJ, for weakening discipline, lowering morale, and contributing to the army's early defeats. This charge is specious on many levels, not least in that it did not become law until some three weeks before the North Korean invasion. Behind much of the faultfinding was the fantasy that the late-1940s

army was both a well-disciplined and just organization before the UCMJ wrecked it. Compounding this fantasy was the assumption that, left alone, the army could have revived pre-World War II standards and discipline. But it was apparent to an impartial onlooker that the postwar military justice system was failing to deter crime or punish criminals. Moreover, until it restored its reputation the army would be unable to recruit or retain the skilled technicians needed to maintain and use sophisticated equipment, educated managers to administer one of the nation's biggest businesses, or highly motivated warriors to fight on when their officers and noncoms were piles of radioactive ash. Such soldiers would not tolerate the rigid prewar discipline, nor could they perform their necessary tasks under the supervision of the prewar army's barely literate NCOs [noncommissioned officers] and absentee officers. For very practical reasons, the postwar army was going to be different than the prewar army, and would operate under very different discipline. (35)

After the Korean War, men like generals Matthew Ridgway and Maxwell Taylor had to create a force suited to fight either a limited conventional war or a limited atomic war. Soldiers would need new, more sophisticated equipment to survive on the atomic battlefield. Guided missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, and new communications systems would make waging war far more complex.

General Taylor, Army Chief of Staff (1955–59), experimented with a new organizational structure, the “Pentomic Division”—a formation of five battle groups meant to increase survivability in an atomic attack. The five-part concept assumed the use of tactical atomic weapons to maximize the firepower of the new division. The ultimate goal was to prove the Army's continuing relevance in the atomic era and to shore up its prestige as compared to the Air Force. One drawback of the Pentomic concept was its reliance on tactical nuclear weapons. Army officials stressed that using such low-yield weapons would not trigger a general atomic war. The debate over the practical utility of atomic weapons—however “low yield”—on the battlefield framed the discussion of the Army's role in national defense.

The Army made plans for the use of missiles and atomic weapons as both military and civil defense assets. Its Nike missile program, begun in 1944, created a series of surface-to-air missiles to replace anti-aircraft guns defending American cities from potential Soviet air raids. In addition, the Army's Jupiter Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles, equipped with nuclear warheads, were installed in Italy and Turkey (i.e., within range of the USSR) until the development of ICBMs that could hit Soviet targets from launch points in the United States. The Davy Crockett missile, with a sub-kiloton warhead, was designed to be launched from a recoilless rifle. But giving nuclear weapons to individual soldiers on a putative battlefield was too reckless to contemplate seriously. Bombs and missiles were normally deployed only by specially trained officers on bases or in planes. Moreover, the inspection regimen for Davy Crockett units was so rigorous that few passed muster. In short, significant investments in advanced weapons did not improve the Army's standing under the Eisenhower administration. Linn also highlights the effects of misguided policy decisions on both officers and soldiers.

The problems faced by the officer corps went beyond unfavorable assignments. After the Korean War, Army commanders labored under micromanagers and an oppressive bureaucracy that stifled the initiative of junior officers, many of whom were activated reservists who saw no viable career path in the Army. Reservists commissioned from ROTC programs were, Linn shows, in a precarious position compared with their Regular Army counterparts.

The enlisted ranks faced their own difficulties in the 1950s. The glut of senior NCOs left over from the Korean War curtailed the chances for promotion in the next cohort of junior officers. To mitigate this, Army leaders created two new ranks, E-8 and E-9, and purged inefficient personnel to improve the career chances of draftees and volunteers.

As the 1950s drew to a close, so did the Army's interest in limited atomic warfare. As Linn persuasively argues, if the Army was going to use tactical atomic weapons to counter the Soviet numerical

advantage, it would have to ensure that doing so would not fatally escalate the scale of any conflict—a patent impossibility, particularly as American and Soviet nuclear arsenals grew in size and cumulative yield. By the early 1960s, it was apparent that the second- and third-order effects of tactical nuclear weapons were simply incalculable.

In his welcome new book, Brian Linn has skillfully contextualized the evolution of military strategic and tactical doctrine in the early atomic era.<sup>1</sup> *Elvis's Army* belongs on the reading lists of both beginning students and seasoned scholars of its subject.

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1. In this respect, his book complements Ingo Trauschweizer's *The Cold War U.S. Army: Building Deterrence for Limited War* (Lawrence: U Kansas Pr, 2008) and Andrew Bacevich's *The Pentomic Era: The US Army between Korea and Vietnam* (Washington: Nat'l Defense U Pr, 1986), which do not address the broader context that interests Linn.