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Review and Reply: On “Why America’s Army Can’t Win America’s Wars” (part 1)

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On “Why America’s Army Can’t Win America’s Wars”

Alex, special operations NCO

This commentary responds to John A. Nagl’s article, “Why America’s Army Can’t Win America’s Wars,” published in the Autumn 2022 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 52, no. 3).

Keywords: victory, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, irregular warfare, Landpower

John Nagl’s article, “Why America’s Army Can’t Win America’s Wars,” features many points of analysis that I appreciate. In particular, his point that “In the wake of the Vietnam War, the US Army turned away from counterinsurgency to focus on deterring and, if necessary, winning a conventional war with the Soviet Union in Europe” struck me.¹ This statement reminds me of the bad impression Special Forces left with the post-Vietnam Army, which influenced the United States to pivot from counterinsurgency and irregular warfare.

As much as I enjoyed Dr. Nagl’s incisive analysis and marvelous setup, his less-than-stellar conclusion disappointed me. I hoped he would provide recommendations for the direction current US strategy should take, especially with the inclusion of the digital domain in warfare, or even offer some thoughts on the shifts in Army culture that must occur to succeed in irregular warfare. Instead, his conclusion reads to me like advocacy for what got American politicians and military leaders in trouble in the first place—nation building.

If success in Afghanistan had been possible, we should have focused on eradicating al-Qaeda and only engaged the Taliban insofar as it supported al-Qaeda. The Taliban was a regional, not a global, threat, so it did not make sense to wage war against it, especially considering it was the stabilizing influence in Afghanistan (much as Saddam Hussein was the stabilizing influence in Iraq). America attempted to create a nation for the Afghans that they did not want or need. Imposing American morality on another culture or assuming that others will acknowledge American culture as inherently superior is foolhardy. Part of success in irregular warfare involves a willingness to negotiate and partner with others who

1. John Nagl, “Why America’s Army Can’t Win America’s Wars,” *Parameters* 52, no. 3 (Autumn 2022): 10, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol52/iss3/3>.

do not share our morals and do not want their nation to be a clone of America. The United States can fight for its interests without imposing its morality—unless making the rest of the world more like America is a strategic interest.

I agree with the author's analysis, and reading his article sharpened my thinking. I disagree, however, with the conclusions he derives from his analysis. A longer commitment does not mean better results. Based on his conclusion, it would make more sense if the author advocated for colonization because that is what a multigenerational commitment looks like—the imposition of rule with an iron fist.² If a nation is unwilling to invade and colonize, then a long-term commitment of soldiers does not make sense. Afghanistan would be better off if either no attempt at nation building had been made and American forces came, eliminated prime targets, and left or if Afghanistan had become an American colony. Instead, we applied a lukewarm solution and tried to make the American way of life appeal to the majority when only a minority were interested in it.

Alex, special operations NCO

The Author Replies

John A. Nagl

Keywords: victory, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, irregular warfare, Landpower

Thank you to Alex for his thoughtful comments on my article, “Why America’s Army Can’t Win America’s Wars,” particularly his description of my analysis as “incisive” and my set-up as “marvelous.” Like any good Army leader, Alex led with praise, but readers rarely write letters to the editor about articles they agree with completely, and this was no exception. Alexander decided my conclusion was “less-than-stellar,” as he had hoped for “recommendations for the direction current US strategy should take, especially with the inclusion of the digital domain in warfare, or even some thoughts on the shifts in Army culture that must take place to be successful in irregular warfare.”

2. Nagl, “America’s Army,” 15.

Of all possible questions, this is the one I would have chosen to answer; though I thought I did so exhaustively in the article, I am happy to do so again. The thesis of my article, at least as I saw it, was that “America must learn the lessons purchased at so high a price in the past 20 years of war and build the capabilities needed to increase the Army’s effectiveness in this kind of war. In the wake of Afghanistan and with continued conflict in Iraq, when the Army swears ‘never again,’ it must mean the United States will never again be as unprepared for irregular warfare as it was when the towers fell.”³

The Army should make changes across doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) to ensure our armor is impenetrable across the spectrum of conflict and not just invest in our capabilities in large-scale combat operations that are unlikely to happen. The current conflict in Ukraine demonstrates how difficult it is for autocrats to invade neighboring countries successfully across a land border without facing US troops in direct conflict, and China is watching the debacle carefully. Beijing is now even less likely to invade Taiwan conventionally than it was when I wrote the article. Instead, China is far more likely to use hybrid and irregular war techniques, including the information and cyber operations Alex discusses, to put economic and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan to achieve its goals.

Hence, my reason for the Army to focus not exclusively on China as a pacing threat, as the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force are doing, but to work across DOTMLPF to maintain and increase our capability and capacity lower on the spectrum of conflict. This work ranges from developing doctrine on information operations in low-intensity conflict and training and advising foreign militaries at the operational, strategic, and enterprise levels to creating force structure to do high-level advising and training all Army forces on low-intensity conflict tasks (even as we regain our edge in large-scale combat operations). As I noted, “the failure to build a sufficient dedicated advisory force structure is among the most critical failures of the military in Iraq and Afghanistan and contributed significantly to American defeat in the latter war.” Maintaining and expanding that force structure to build capacity and capability at the Ministry of Defense level for our allies and partners may be the most important task remaining for the Army as it digests its failures in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴

3. Nagl, “America’s Army,” 14.

4. Nagl, “America’s Army,” 16.

Alex is correct that the Army needs a culture change. This change must begin with a complete examination of why we failed so badly in Iraq and Afghanistan, and my article intended to beg the Army to do just that. We paid too high a price—and our Afghan friends and allies paid even more dearly—for us to make the same mistakes again next time.

Moreover, there will be a next time, more likely than not, in the Hindu Kush. This is my strongest disagreement with Alex. We did not choose to fight with the Taliban. After September 11, Taliban leaders were asked to turn over Osama bin Laden and the leadership of al-Qaeda for justice. When they refused to do so, the United States had no choice but to invade Afghanistan to defeat al-Qaeda. Due to failures in planning and conducting Operation Enduring Freedom, bin Laden escaped to Pakistan, and America's longest war began. We could not have left until bin Laden was brought to justice and should not have left when we did in 2021. A long-term presence in Afghanistan would have prevented radical Islamist extremists from again using the country as a home base for terror. They are mobilizing there now. While I desperately hope they do not succeed in attacking America again, Alex is young enough that he may see US troops in combat there again, securing ground that has already been paid for once with American blood.

John A. Nagl

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