RECONSIDERING THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR:
US MILITARY PRACTICE FROM IRAQ TO AFGHANISTAN

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Outline

- Why Understanding the American Way of War is Important
- What the Phrase “American Way of War” Means:
  - Origins & Debate
  - Some popular notions
- American Strategic Culture
- US Military Practice: Highlights
- Conclusions
Why Understanding It is Important

✓ Ideas about “American Way of War” influence US debates over strategy, force structure, roles, & missions.

✓ Better understanding helps dissolve misconceptions among friends and allies, & manage their expectations.

✓ Adds an historical perspective to the study of contemporary conflicts.

✓ Enables the use of inductive reasoning to expand our understanding of war.
Origins

- Preference for “Annihilation” (attrition);
- Reliance on Overwhelming Force.

Weigley’s book forms basis for Traditional view:
- Gen. (R) W. Dupuy (1991): …fighting & winning *decisively* by using best capabilities of each service (joint); with centralized planning, decentralized execution.
- Gen. (R) W. Clark (2001): …is like WWI, WWII, & Gulf War; “muster an *overwhelmingly* large force: prepare and train it; then use it to achieve militarily *decisive* results.”
- Powell-Weinberger Doctrine.
   - Traditional vs New (RMA + Airpower + SOF)
   - Which is best for today?

   - Too much RMA-Transformation or not enough? More interagency?
   - Marred by Systemic flaws: apolitical, astrategic, & highly sensitive to casualties.
American Strategic Culture

- What is “strategic culture”?  
  - Origins  
  - Problems

- What is “American strategic culture”?  
  - Common claims and assertions  
  - Historical evidence
US Military Practice

Typically defined as: “How Americans have thought about and waged war.”

Is this the sum of America’s wars?
A Broader View

The American Way of War:
“How the United States used military force to protect or promote its interests.”
1803-1812: US shipping lost 917 vessels to British.

By 1800:
US Mediterranean trade = $11 million; but lost $2 million to Barbary states as “tribute.”
Highlights: 1815-1848

- Blackhawk War 1832
- Texan War 1835-36
- Mexican War 1846-48
- Seminole Wars 1816-18, 1835-42, 1855-58

Graduated pressure
Show of force
Clear; area & resource denial.
US strategies: attrition; resource denial; divide & conquer; coercive diplomacy.

US strategy: annihilation to attrition.

Odds: 1:1 or 1.5:1
Highlights: 1898-1913

- **Spanish-American War 1898**
  - Naval battles of annihilation.
  - Land battles for key terrain: cities, ports.

- **Show of force; decapitation.**

- **Search & destroy; Clear, Hold, Build.**

- **Philippine-American War 1898-1902**
  - Pulahanes 1902-07
  - Moros 1902-13

- **Spanish-American War 1898**
  - Cuba 1906-09
  - Panama 1903

- **Honduras 1912-19**
- **Nicaragua 1912-26**

- **Show of force; maneuver.**
**Highlights: 1914-1934**

- **Pershing’s Expedition** 1916
- **Tampico** 1914
- **Cuba** 1917-20
- **Haiti** 1915-34
- **Honduras** 1924-25
- **Nicaragua** 1926-33
- **Panama** 1918-20
- **Dominican Republic** 1916-24

Show of force; maneuver.

Show of force; decapitation: Clear, Hold, Build.

Proto-Offshore Balancing.
Highlights: 1917-1938

- Attrition
- First World War 1917-18
- North Russian Exp. 1918-20
- Siberian Exp. 1918-20
- China Exp. 1912-38

Show of force:
- maneuver
- protection
1941-1958

Korean War 1950-53

Annihilation; Exhaustion; Coercive diplomacy

Attrition

Show of force

WWII ETO 1942-45

Lebanon 1958

WWII PTO 1942-45
1960-2013

Vietnam War 1960-75

OEF 2002-11

Chile 1970

Panama 1989

British Guiana 1963

Cuba 1961

Haiti 1994, 2004

Dominican Republic 1965

Grenada 1983

Decapitation

Attrition; Clear, Hold, Build; Coercive diplomacy

Libya 2011

Panama

Guatemala 1954

El Salvador 1979-91

Nicaragua 1981

Decapitation; Clear, Hold, Build

Annihilation

Balkan Wars 1995, 1999

Iraq 2003-11

Afghanistan 2001-14

DS/DS 1990-91

Somalia 1992-94

DS/DS 1990-91

Lebanon 1983

Dom. Rep. 1965

DS/DS 1990-91

Iraq 2003-11

Afghanistan 2001-14

Decapitation; Clear, Hold, Build

Dom. Rep. 1965

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Decapitation; Clear, Hold, Build
America’s Asymmetric Wars

- America’s asymmetric wars were Civil War, WWI, & WWII: They were the exceptions!
Current (JP 3-0) model for operational phases is inaccurate; implies causal linkage.
Conclusions

- War was an instrument of both US policy & politics, both internationally & domestically.
- Interests were “prioritized” by US heads of state, & often included national honor or prestige; vested rather than core.
- American military strategy mixed Jominian terrain-oriented theorems & Clausewitzian battle-oriented concepts.
- American Strategic Culture is an “elusive fiction.”
Conclusions (cont.)

- US levels of force were sufficient (or barely) rather than overwhelming:
  - Force-ratios often 1:1 or less;
  - Use of militia & other irregulars increased friction & risk; almost every US war was hybrid.

- US military strategies varied: (1) annihilation; (2) attrition & (2a) exhaustion; (3) decapitation; and (4) coercive diplomacy.
Questions?