



Book Review: The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War by Brian McAllister Linn

Onur Sultan



To cite this book review:

Sultan, O. (2023). Book Review: The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War [Review of the Book: *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*, by Brian McAllister Linn] *Horizon Insights*, 6(1), 19-21.
<https://doi.org/10.31175/hi.2023.01.04>

Link to this issue of the journal: https://behorizon.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Horizon-Insights_2023_1.pdf

Horizon Insights Journal Homepage: <https://behorizon.org/horizon-insights/>

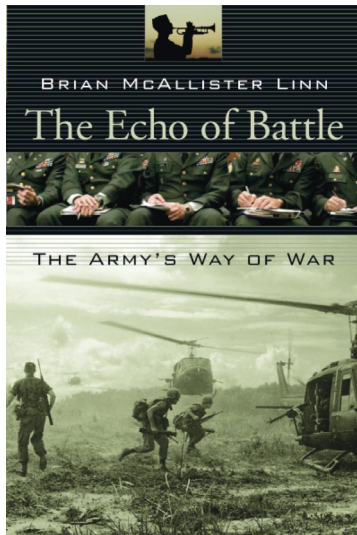
ISSN: 2593-3582 (printed), 2593-3590 (online)

Submit your article



Book Review: “The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War”

by Brian McAllister Linn



Onur Sultan*

The aim of the Linn's book is to give an insight to anyone trying to understand first how the United States Army prepared for war, second if it found what it expected on the battlefield, third what adaptations it had to make and finally how it changed itself accordingly. One lesson from the book is that the Army certainly changed as the time passed. It changed doctrine, equipment, mindset, organization, vision of future warfare and the way it trained. However it did not happen without struggle.

The very first thing that the author admits is the ever-changing nature of war. In order to support that he says: "Until recently, a common joke at all the war colleges was that the one subject not studied was war". (pg.2) Then he indicates given that constantly changing concept of war, the vision of future warfare cannot be created solely by soldiers. But the peacetime discussions and scholars together have helped constructively understand, envision and make preparations for the next warfare and thus create The Army's Way of War.

Then he elaborates on three schools of thought that he traces back to revolution and the war of 1812 after which the professional Army was created. According to him, all those schools of thoughts have created

magnificent leaders and incompetent officers, great accomplishments and pathetic failures. The army officers have always fought their fights guided by those schools of thought. Some have been inspired by only one and some have been simply inspired by two or all three of them. In any case though, these schools of thought, namely guardian, manager and hero, have shaped the US Army officers' concept of warfare during the preparation and execution. Those officers trying to learn from past by army's lessons learned tradition have evaluated the previous wars based on their future warfare concept. In other words they have heard the same "echo of battle".

The first and oldest of those military philosophies or schools of thought is the "Guardian". According to the guardians the war was both art and science. They referred to its nature as science which was governed by laws and principles. If applied correctly, it would bring about the results intended and help predict the outcomes. The art part was simply its application. According to guardians only officers who have mastered this science could be trusted to perform this art. Guardians were the first ones that created the US army and its first adherents were the Corps of Engineer officers. In their early days, the Guardians were the ones that contended a strong US defense system could be only accomplished by strong coastal fortifications along the Atlantic coasts facing the "predatory European great powers". This strategy was later stretched to cover also western coast and overseas possessions. Linn contends that although this philosophy lost some of its importance starting with WWII and leaps and bounds in naval military technology and aircraft, it is still the guiding beacon in the defense of continental U.S. They claim that the protection of American land can be possible through creation of strong intercontinental ballistic missiles and a strong airforce. When defeated, the Guardians would blame an irrational American society for refusing to accept Guardian defense policies and hence allocating sufficient material and human resources.

Second school of thought is the Heroes which is a strong contrast to Guardians. Heroes always put the personal fortes fore. According to them the fate of future battles would be determined by decisive leaders with military genius, experience, courage, morale and discipline. Because the wars are fought by men, not weapons. So it is the spirit of the [man] who fights and of the [man] who leads which gains the victory. In case of defeat, they would blame US army for being a soulless organization in which warriors are subordinated to technicians and careerists. Or sometimes they would blame American society for lacking the spiritual qualities basic for warfighting. At their best they provide decisive battle leadership and an ability to adapt to whatever they find. At the worst they are the officers in the 1930's who believed the élan of a cavalry charge could defeat machine guns.

The last school of thought Linn mentions is the Managers, who oppose the views of both Guardians and Heroes. In the second chapter of the book, the author delineates their efforts to understand the true nature of the war be it military and civilian. Especially Civil War's and The German War of Unification's effects were immense. Scholars learning from what happened in Crimea, Koeniggratz, Sedan started to make comparisons between Civil War, Gettysburg. They were also subject to many developments in military technology

* Onur Sultan is a research fellow and project coordinator at Beyond the Horizon ISSG. He currently follows a PhD program at the University of Antwerp. His research area covers Security in the Middle East, terrorist propaganda, radicalization and polarization, and Yemen.

like precision and rapidity of fire, increase in range so on and so forth... Then they came to the conclusion that the war was a natural outgrowth of political and economic rivalry and an essential component of the United States' rise as a great power. They encouraged the creation of a mass army that was commanded by professionals, armed with best weapons, and conducted training in peace. They were basically suggesting a Prussian model army, that lived war before its coming. If their overwhelming resources, far better administration and meticulous planning fail to secure victory, Managers would just say reorganize. According to them, WWII was a manager's war and the rescue of Western Europe from Germans is its greatest success. Managers often try to de-emphasize human factor.

Linn asserts that whenever a war is at the doorsill, it is something the Army did not expect for but just something it had to adapt itself to. The latest GWOT, Operation Iraqi freedom and invasion of Afghanistan is no exception in this case. In order to shed light on his claims he gives examples from history. According to him one of the lessons the army learned after the fall of Saigon, Vietnam was never to engage itself in such counterinsurgency operations or irregular conflicts again. They emphasized the dominance of that idea during the Operation Desert Storm in 1991. But still the same army seemed to have forgotten that lesson when it started invasion of Iraq in March 2003. When it was April, army was again fighting insurgency, which was not the card they wanted to play.

Last, Linn claims that the history is abused by soldiers. He says, whenever the history is looked into, there has been a selective study to support the concept it has. So, the same echo of battle has been heard. That's why, Linn thinks that all three schools of thought have failed to prepare the army to the war it is going to fight.

However, Linn has a hopeful outlook for future. He thinks that the current army tries to avoid straightjackets and tries to establish its own doctrine to fight insurgency operation as we witness happening in Iraq. To support that he gives the General Petraus example trying to bring as many elites from different backgrounds as possible to bring together the doctrine for countering insurgency.

Does Linn succeed his aim that was stated in the first paragraph? The answer is yes. To support his arguments, Linn gives well-thought examples. Looking into the clashes around the globe and how they are fought, one is amazed to find that there is nearly no part compatible with conventional warfare that is thought as staple in most military academies. The war fought in Afghanistan, Iraq and nowadays in Ukraine all show divergence. The author really makes a great point saying Army fights the war it has to but not it has prepared for.

Also, the well categorisation of subcultures as guardians, heroes and managers will certainly ring bells for those involved in defence capacity building or planning. The groups in each country often interact, sometimes clash and shape definition of concepts and doctrines under defense planning efforts. The book helps name those subcultures or shoos of thought and understand the development of the doctrine compared to history.

Another lessons learned from the book is the great importance of understanding or envisioning the future warfare. Based on this vision, finances are allocated, doctrine and equipment change, the way the army train change, so on and so forth. That is why more and more efforts from both military and civilian environment should be encouraged to help understand how the future war would be like and proponents of all three schools of thought should be present to make up for aspects that a specific school of thought would normally disregard.

All in all, reading the history of one of the world's biggest and overstretched armies from different perspectives builds in the mind of the reader a picture of what kind of reactions were triggered for what events. Leaving the events in the past, the reader can understand if those reactions / assumptions were true, if not what kind of adaptations were necessary to counter them. In the end what lessons can be learned from them. Although the stories are specific to the US Army, the lessons drawn can be applied to any army around the globe.

Overall, the book is well-structured, the ideas have been expressed fluently and can be understood easily.