

# **This Afghanistan War in the Light of America's Post Vietnam Military Culture: The Logic of Asymmetrical Death and Commemoration**

**Mark MEIGS**

**A**ERICAN MILITARY CULTURE is deployed from the top down along a hierarchical chain of command. The strategy of this culture is planned. Its tactics are carefully crafted. Both are diffused by highly self-conscious leaders and repeated by others, over a complex system of military communications where they stimulate and motivate the sensibilities of individuals throughout the entire military organization. This culture from above originates among a handful of senior officers with a similar education, career and professional experience that started in Vietnam and traversed the American military's darkest days in the 1970's. Eventually, it meets the diverse emotions and loyalties of very different individuals with very different experiences. This culture from above can either successfully help keep the diverse institution organized and transmit back up the line of command the reassuring messages of shared values, or the culture of the upper echelons can lose its hold on the younger men and women down below. Expressed like this, military culture—essentially the meanings attached to death and destruction and the threat of death and destruction—can seem like a sinister attempt at the manipulation of people's lives and ideas. But within an organization dependent on teamwork and intended for violence against other similar organizations, using this tool to its greatest advantage seems necessary for successful operations.

Current military literature, speeches by high-ranking officers and testimony before Congress, all express this military cultural strategy as a

“non-negotiable contract with the people of the United States to fight and win, and win decisively, the nation’s wars.” The strategy of military culture is in the word “decisively.” The enemy will be forced to do or stop doing, what it had not been willing to do or stop doing before. The interests of the United States will be advanced. A fundamental difference with the strategy, and therefore the military culture, of other countries can be measured with this phrase. When a senior European general in Brussels says that the EU’s military ambitions do not include being “in the war-fighting game,” he displays a European military strategy and culture turned away, since World War II, from the possibility and the necessity of decisive victory, its strategic possibilities and human costs.<sup>1</sup>

Aiming for decisive victory in all conflicts erases openly expressed doubts and hesitations on the part of the American military. It would be difficult to exaggerate the gulf that this produces between American military personnel and their counterparts elsewhere. Where other military groups must jockey for position in alliance with the American military or against it—or in the manner of the French since Charles de Gaulle, forever attempting to define a third position—the Americans can focus on winning the conflict. While other military cultures produce a rhetoric that must diminish the decisive acts of the American military, the Americans may be counted upon to maximize the effects of their own actions. Where representatives of other military cultures will speak of the intransigent history of armed conflict and the recurring political difficulties that follow the conflicts, American military spokesmen will sound as though ending conflicts in a manner advantageous to the United States were inevitable even when the narrative of their successful exploits will stop somewhere short of political negotiation, which, in any case, falls to the lot of diplomats and politicians.

In Afghanistan, at the moment, this difference due to the assumption of dominance on the part of Americans can reduce American military activities and their proponents, to a condition of incoherence when viewed from the outside. At the time of writing, December 2001, imminent

<sup>1</sup> The “non-negotiable contract” is ubiquitous in the speeches of American generals. The European general is quoted in *The Economist*, November 24-30, 2001, 31. For these technological and military asymmetries between European allies and the United States expressed as diplomatic impotence see David M. Malone, former Canadian Ambassador to the U.N., “When America Banged the Table and the Others Fell Silent,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 11, 2001.

military victory makes American strategic calculations appear correct to almost everyone. The translation of military victory, however, into some stable political solution may easily bring back earlier doubts. Outside commentators have worried that to fight the Taliban regime of Afghanistan is not necessarily to fight terrorism. They have worried about the difficulty the United States will find itself in, and will lead the rest of the world into, if it continues the war against other states sympathetic to and helpful to terrorists. They point out that the United States has sometimes supported forces very like terrorists, with no legitimate mandate, against legitimate national forces. They see a connection between the attraction of a destructive cause like that of Osama bin Laden for the disaffected peoples of the world and the domination of the United States in cultural and economic terms. Some claim outright, and many more suspect, that United States policies, foreign, economic, and cultural—in fact the dominance of the United States in all these areas—has led to terrorist acts, as people with no political voice that counts in the United States, and few military means, seek to correct these lacks. Spokesmen for the American military, on the other hand, can speak of the unquestionably improved position of the United States, vis-à-vis terrorism, with the destruction of each Taliban camp. They will speak of an effective deterrence. They can also speak with brutal frankness about the connection between American business expansion and American military might.<sup>2</sup> That the United States should dominate in the conflicts of the world is their mission, after all. Being able to dominate, they are not required to seek out negotiating strategies and angles. Their mission is to deliver the enemy to the negotiating table, “with his will to fight,” exhausted.<sup>3</sup>

Lest this version of the strategy and effects of American military culture seem simplistic, even tautological—expressible perhaps by the phrase, “the dominant seek to dominate,” and its corollary, “might makes right,” it should be remembered that the defeat of the American military in Vietnam

<sup>2</sup> See for example, General Eric K. Shinseki, Army Chief of Staff, “The Army in Transition: A Historic Opportunity,” *Army Magazine*, October 2000, 2.

<sup>3</sup> This difference of perception is of course reflected in the wider public as well. See for example Brian Knowlton, “How the World Sees the U.S. and Sept. 11,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 20, 2001, in which a poll showed that 26% of non-U.S. respondents expressed the opinion that most ordinary people believe that U.S. policies and actions in the world were a major cause of the September 11 attacks. No U.S. citizens expressed that idea.

remains ever present in the memories of senior officers today, and has left its mark on this culture. In Vietnam, the dominant United States did not dominate. Might lost its way. Senior officers, who were lieutenants and captains then, are determined not to make the same mistakes again.

Some of the mistakes of Vietnam were political. The first of these political mistakes of the war, which both caused and aggravated military difficulties, was that at times there was no viable South Vietnamese government fighting the war with the United States. As the United States took more and more responsibility for prosecuting the war, it took more and more responsibility for running the country. Withdrawing from the war required patching together South Vietnamese institutions. The American military consciously tries to avoid this problem now. Secondly, military authorities today, insist that they cannot and will not prosecute a war that the people of the United States do not support. The military will seemingly use every means at its disposal to obtain and retain that popular support; it will use all the cultural tactics at its disposal to maintain that support. But the military establishment does not wish to find itself separated from the emotional and material base of the country again. Vietnam was a long and indecisive war providing ample time for relations between army and civil population to degrade. The United States Army will try to win quickly.<sup>4</sup> The third major error in the Vietnam debacle, and the most important as it is remembered by the military, had to do with military strategy, and therefore has been most susceptible to the reform of military doctrine and culture-building since. General Westmoreland decided upon a strategy of attrition. His plan for winning the war was not a plan for a decisive stroke against the enemy's concentrated military force, but the gradual wearing down of the enemy. This strategy of attrition separated American military cultural strategy from its historical roots in a strategy of decisive annihilation, at the same time that it separated strategy from the military cultural tactics of deploying death, as we will see. It is worth considering these three errors of Vietnam strategy because they have left such a large impact on the military culture of the United States today.

The reluctance of American military authorities to replace local authority explains in part President George Bush's refusal to continue the war in Iraq up the road to Baghdad to unseat Saddam Hussein. American military men

<sup>4</sup> Brig. Gen. Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U. S. Army in the Gulf War* (London: Brassey's, 1997) 18.

regretted that decision at the time, out of a sense of frustration when total victory seemed possible. Since then official regrets are expressed only in strictly military terms: they regret having left so much of the Republican Guard intact to continue the military domination of the country.<sup>5</sup> This same reluctance of the Pentagon to engage in “nation building,” explains much of the hesitation on the way to Kabul in the present war. The advance towards the Afghan capital stopped, giving time for Pashtun leaders, and others to defect from the Taliban. The reason seems clear. Without sufficient Pashtun support on the side of the anti-Taliban forces, it is unlikely that any coalition of ethnic groups will be able to govern Afghanistan. No American military man imagines that outside authority will be able to impose a coalition on the Afghans. The soldiers of the Afghanistan Northern Alliance eventually did enter Kabul, and continued their advances against the requests of American military authorities, who must now hope that this show of strength and unity presages the unexpected emergence of a Northern Alliance capable of ruling.

To avoid losing the support of the American public, the American military must present its wars as just—hence the highly dramatic and message laden names of operations: “Urgent Fury,” in Grenada in 1987, “Just Cause,” in Panama, in 1989. But above all, the engagements must be successful, brief, decisive, and cost as little as possible in lives. As elements in a military culture none of this seems surprising, and it would be hard to fault any of these objectives once the necessity for war has been admitted. The surprise must be in the willingness of other military cultures to expend lives in a profligate way for ill-defined goals over a long period of time. In Vietnam, the strategy of attrition eventually adopted by General Westmoreland, had done exactly that. In July 1965, General Westmoreland outlined his plan for the use of greater numbers of American troops in his “search-and-destroy” strategy. His plan called for the build-up of American and allied troops during the rest of 1965, a prolonged period of offensive action during 1966, and a year, or a year and a half for the “defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas.”<sup>6</sup> With hindsight, anyone can see with certainty what military men should have seen at the time: that this was a vague plan for a long war in which the

<sup>5</sup> Brig. Gen. Robert H. Scales, Jr. notes only that the coalition forces and command, never reached their “culminating point,” and that therefore they could have continued (*Certain Victory*, 314-315).

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1973) 465.

American will to win, and eventually the American will to destroy all resistance in Vietnam, would be pitted against North Vietnamese will and capacity to continue that resistance. Such a plan might at some time have led to the annihilation of the enemy, but at a great cost to both sides and not in a decisive action.

According to the military historian Russell Weigley, this strategy of attrition resulted from a series of Cold War calculations that tried to balance the burdens of containing Communist aggression militarily while not bankrupting the economy of the United States. The solution, according to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in his well-known address of December 1953, was "a maximum deterrent at a bearable cost." In other words, the United States would prepare "massive retaliation," anywhere it chose, to Soviet aggression. Dulles especially wished to avoid committing American troops to Southeast Asia, where the French were engaged against the Viet Minh. By May of 1954, of course, the French army had been defeated at Dienbienphu and the strategy of "massive retaliation," looked too rigid to be an effective defense against serious communist aggressions on a limited scale.

In the years that followed, civilian and military strategists, for example Henry A. Kissinger in his 1957 book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, and military men too, notably General Maxwell Taylor, developed various ways in which American containment of communism could match aggressions with graduated responses and limited aims. These strategists of limited war aims and means called for a significant break with an American military tradition of a strategy of annihilation so characteristic of the American Civil War and successful American military planning in World War II. Departing from this successful model in the late 1950's, Kissinger wrote, "It is important for our leadership to understand that total victory is no longer possible and for the public to become aware of the dangers of pressing for such a course."<sup>7</sup> General Maxwell D. Taylor of the Joint Chiefs of Staff eventually coined the expression "strategy of flexible response," in promoting American readiness to fight limited wars calibrated to different degrees of communist aggression.<sup>8</sup>

During the Administration of John Kennedy and under the influence of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the choices between "massive

<sup>7</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1957) 171.

<sup>8</sup> Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper, 1960) 26-37, quoted in Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 420.

retaliation,” and “strategy of flexible response,” changed, both taking on the look of warfare measured out in careful doses. At his former position at the head of the Ford Motor Company, McNamara had been known for quantitative systems analysis. “Massive retaliation” became the “second strike,” or the notion of “assured destruction.” If the Soviet Union attacked the United States with nuclear missiles, the United States would have a sufficient number of missiles left to cause “unacceptable damage” to Soviet society.<sup>9</sup> Unacceptable damage came to mean the death of one fourth of the population and the destruction of one fourth of Soviet industrial capacity to the numbers-oriented McNamara.

At the same time, and in harmony both with General Taylor’s doubts about the usefulness of nuclear weapons, and with President Kennedy’s desire to throw off the passive look of Cold War deterrence, the Kennedy Administration committed itself to a series of limited aggressions, first against Cuba, then in Vietnam. In Vietnam, under the quantitative management of McNamara, flexible response became calibrated attrition measured with kill ratios and body counts. If the United States forces could kill enough of the enemy while losing few enough of their own, eventually the communists would run out of men, or so went the strategic calculations of McNamara and Westmoreland.

Under General Taylor’s influence, the United States Army’s move toward a doctrine of limited war was reflected in changes to the 1962 Army Field Service Regulations (FM 100-5). This manual that translates military doctrine into action, had always stated that “The ultimate objective of all military operations is the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces and his will to fight.” In 1962, the phrase was dropped. In those days of limited war and counter-insurgency, it had sounded too much like the promotion of unlimited war, which now necessarily meant the use of nuclear weapons. The clear aim of “destroying the enemy’s armed forces,” had been replaced with the careful counting of war’s destruction to arrive at something close to what the principle civilian strategist of the 1960’s, Thomas C. Schelling, called “compellence,” a neologism that meant causing an opponent to act in a desirable way.

Military strategy can no longer be thought of, as it could be for some countries in some areas, as the science of military victory. It is now equally, if not more, the art of coercion, of intimidation and deterrence... It is the power to hurt, not military strength in the traditional sense, that inhere in our most impressive military capabilities at the present time... And it is pain and violence, not force

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Weigley, *The American War of War*, 443.

in the traditional sense, that inheres also in some of the least impressive military capabilities of the present time—the plastic bomb, the terrorist’s bullet, the burnt crops, and the tortured farmer.<sup>10</sup>

According to historian, Russell Weigley, what Shelling meant was that in the age of atomic bombs that could not be used, violence must be used diplomatically.

Linking attrition to limited war—thus body counts—also linked this strategic error of Vietnam to the basic tactic of military culture, the deployment of death. Certainly death rests near the heart of all military thought now and throughout history. The strategy of attrition and counting in the Vietnam war disgusted a generation of military because it used death in so many perverse ways. These men now command the United States Army. The body counting and kill ratios of the Vietnam war encouraged officers to exaggerate the importance of enemy soldiers their units had killed and the quantity and quality of enemy equipment they had destroyed, while minimizing the importance of their own losses. Concentrating on the enemy’s wounds rather than on the injuries to your own soldiers is psychologically de-motivating. If a unit has an efficient kill ratio, the suspicion arises that it is a unit of barbarians. But if the unit has a low, inefficient ratio, if, for example, it loses more men than it kills, those men have been lost for nothing. In either case the training, patriotism, physical and mental health, bravery and sacrifice of American soldiers along with the leadership of their officers either surviving or lost on the field of attrition, could count for nothing in the slow attainment of victory counted only in enemy dead. This strategy that sapped the motivation out of individuals doing the fighting, encouraged officers to miscount while it revolted people back in the United States and allowed for a very long war. When your own soldiers are either successful barbarians or forgotten canon-fodder, the national motivation cannot be maintained. Pain administered to the communist forces of Vietnam under such circumstances produced the opposite of “compellence.”

The failure of Westmoreland’s Vietnam strategy and the wedge it drove between the people of the United States and the Army inspired a generation of officers to reform that institution in the 1970’s and 1980’s and give it the organization and culture it has today. Through their reforms they have rebelled against what they considered to be the non-strategy of

<sup>10</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), quoted in Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 475.

attrition in Vietnam, and also the “compellence” thesis of Schelling and against all limited war theories as well as their conclusions taken from the Vietnam era. Rear Admiral J. C. Wylie, in the aftermath of Vietnam, considered that while atomic weapons were too destructive to be used, limited war must eventually be lost by a country like the United States. An economically and politically dominant country, like the United States, could never wish to advance policy through violence, but only to preserve the status quo against better motivated foes who had more to gain in any limited engagement. Russell Weigley himself, in his book of 1973, concluded that, “the history of usable combat may at last be reaching its end.”<sup>11</sup> All these strategic theories had counted up the costs of war in the wrong way, according to reforming United States Army officers of the post-Vietnam decades. In their reforms, they would find a new way to wage war successfully.

Today’s American military does not reveal kill ratios and may not calculate them. This author, at least, has found none for the Gulf War. The official history of the Gulf War tells of American tank crews “killing” enemy tanks in some detail, and from this information the reader can begin to put together his own ratio, but the emphasis in the book, as it was in military briefings and media coverage during the war, is on the superior equipment, tactics and strategy that quickly won the war and could have annihilated the enemy.<sup>12</sup> By mid-December, there have only been three American soldiers killed in Afghanistan, and those by an American bomb. Figures on enemy dead are vague, to say the least. On the other hand, any examination of the United States Army’s web site reveals a preoccupation with the death of American service personnel and their memorialization that has nothing to do with the efficiency with which they have dispatched enemy soldiers or equipment. The preponderant number of American military personnel killed in this war, 125, were of course those who died

<sup>11</sup> Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 477. See Admiral J. C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1967), quoted at length in Weigley, 476. See also, Keith L. Nelson and Spencer L. Olin, Jr., *Why War: Ideology, Theory and History* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1979), a Vietnam-inspired essay on the uses of war by stronger and weaker forces on the defensive and on the offensive. It is interesting to note that Weigley’s book, though prominently listed as a fundamental history of American strategy on the Army Chief of Staff’s reading list—an important guide to the military culture discussed here—receives criticism for his pacifist Vietnam era conclusions.

See <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/reference/CSAList/list.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> See Brig. Gen. Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory* (Washington and London: Brassey’s, 1994).

when the commercial airliner was crashed into the Pentagon. At a memorial service held outside the building opposite the side where the damage had been done, speeches were made by President George W. Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others. Lt. Gen. John A. Van Alstyne, director of the Pentagon Family Assistance Center, spoke for the families of the dead, saying "all they asked for was that their loved ones be remembered for their daily heroic service leading up to the day of the attacks and ultimate sacrifice." President Bush promised that the country "will always honor their memory." He went on to say, "Unlike our enemies, we value every life, and we mourn every loss—yet we are not afraid." Secretary Rumsfeld said that "these heroic deaths reminds (sic) us of a new kind of evil..."<sup>13</sup> That the Pentagon should memorialize its dead comes as no surprise, but that these dead should be memorialized as heroes in their daily work in a large office-building demonstrates a deliberate change in military mentality and public relations since Vietnam when there were no parades for returning soldiers.

Among the reforms of the Army since those days has been an emphasis on army quality of life, family unity and recognition of family participation and support of any soldier, man or woman, who follows the job of soldiering often far from home for long periods.<sup>14</sup> When viewed from this family point of view, all military engagement is seen as sacrifice and daily routine activity is viewed as heroic. The contrast with the era of Robert McNamara and his quantitative systems analysis approach to winning Vietnam efficiently could not be greater. The intangibles of loyalty and *esprit de corps* are constantly reinforced. The damage to the Pentagon itself became personified in an Army news story of October 9, 2001. The story described the damage to the building and the people who worked there, as a crime, but the building and the people in it remain steadfast, healing quickly. Remembrance immediately becomes motivation in this military culture.

Four weeks after the Sept. 11 terrorist attack, the gaping wound left in the south side of the Pentagon appears cleaned and sterilized... Inside, the undamaged majority of the Pentagon, soldiers, Marines, airmen, sailors and

<sup>13</sup> Quotes taken from Joe Burlas, "Pentagon Employees Remember Fallen Comrades," Army Link News  
<http://www.dtic.mil/armylink/news/Oct2001/a20011015mem101501.html>.

<sup>14</sup> For a brief description of the new emphasis on family support in the American military see Brig. Gen. Robert M. Scales, *Certain Victory*, chapter 1, "Forging a New Army," 38. See also James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

civilians continue serving as before the attack. One could hardly guess the calamity that had transpired here from viewing the seemingly normal operations in this massive complex... Standing directly outside the impact-area the gap looks rather small in relation to the wide sides of the edifice. The collapsed floors have been removed, and the evidence of violence has been extricated... Salvaged, a two-foot-diameter cast-iron shield representing the Army Reserve is blackened by fire but hardly the worse for wear. Perhaps one day it will be placed as is, thoughtfully and appropriately, with a plaque of remembrance. For now, it leans silently against an unlit wall... Yes, we will surely remember the Pentagon and related World Trade Center attacks, just as we do the Alamo.<sup>15</sup>

On October 24, Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White and Army Chief of Staff General Eric K. Shinseki, distributed medals to seventy military and civilian personnel who had distinguished themselves in the Pentagon attack. Purple Hearts were given to 27 soldiers for wounds, and 19 civilians received the equivalent Defense of Freedom medal. The Defense of Freedom medal was newly invented for this occasion and emphasizes both the new close identity between military and civilian sentiment that the army wishes to maintain, but also the broad definition of heroism and sacrifice in the reformed army. The Soldiers Medal was presented to 27 soldiers for heroism. Four commercial contractors received the Decoration for Distinguished Civilian Service, presumably for work related to cleaning the damaged site. Again, service, whether heroic or not, was commemorated. The names of all recipients, their rank, award and home were listed. No service to the military will go un-remarked, whether by a purchasing agent for the Army executive dining-room, or a chief of compensations and entitlements, both of whom received a purple heart for wounds.

Sentiment and memorialization come from below in the Pentagon hierarchy as well. A report dated October 3, 2001, by Staff Sgt. John Valceanu, "Commentary: Notes Help Keep Memories Alive," diffused messages written by family members on a makeshift memorial outside the Pentagon on the Army Link News. "First I want to say that you are an amazing person and have touched me and others deeply within all our hearts," said one such note. "You were like a best friend, mother and aunt," said another. In Valceanu's report, the notes were followed by long lists naming the dead with rank or civilian status, specialty and age. In the lists, civilians were mixed with military personnel, non-commissioned persons with Lieutenant Colonels and a Lieutenant General, men were

<sup>15</sup> Sgt. Nate Orme, "Commentary: Remember those Fallen at Pentagon," Army Link News, <http://www.dtic.mil/armylink/news/Oct2001/a2001101pentagoncom.html>.

mixed with women, as if the note addressed to a “best friend, mother and aunt,” could have been to a male colonel or a woman file clerk, and carried the same emotional weight. The different services—Army, Navy, Marines, Airforce—seem to have been segregated. The strong emotional message of sacrifice, service, continuity and the ubiquity of heroism can travel up and down the military hierarchy: “Your memory will be carried on in our hearts and through your son and unborn child.” “Please show us your twinkling eyes in the sunlight.” The messages connecting the living with the dead can be unabashedly patriotic as well as uniting the military family with the people of the United States, while designating outsiders as well. “I am so very sorry that your life had to end this way because people are hateful and evil.” “Let us remember the price they paid just for being Americans.”<sup>16</sup>

Placing the line between insiders and outsiders requires delicacy in military culture. More than 125 names were on the list in Staff Sgt. John Valceanu’s commentary. Some of these may have been identified as not being victims of the September 11 attack in later reports. In many speeches and references, the number of victims is given as 189. The 125 killed Pentagon personnel added to 64 people aboard the airplane that exploded against the building results in that number. The number of hijackers in the airplane, however, was never mentioned in a memorial context. In American memorials, all the dead belong to one side. Unlike in Vietnam, the American military does not draw public attention to the enemy dead.

This asymmetric memorialization of the dead related to the asymmetry of casualties in the current war in Afghanistan come from several causes. First, sophisticated American technology should protect American soldiers from large numbers of casualties while inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. Soviet technological superiority during their war in Afghanistan did not protect them sufficiently, but then their technology proved to be ineffective against American equipment in the Gulf War. American technology seems much better suited to this task. Second, the Soviet Army was fighting a Vietnam-style ground war against guerrillas. American soldiers will not fight a war again where they serve as surrogates in someone else’s civil war. They will therefore maintain a certain distance through the use of technology and will not take the place of Afghan soldiers fighting the Taliban only to have to rebuild a local military

<sup>16</sup> Staff Sgt. John Valceanu, “Commentary: Notes help keep memories alive,” Army Link News, October 3, 2001, <http://www.dtic.mil/armylink/news/20011003commnotesrememberance.html>.

afterwards, the way they did in Vietnam.

The final cause of asymmetry in casualties in this war stems from its nature as a war against guerrillas and terrorists. Americans will try to destroy enemy units entirely. The necessity of destroying guerrilla forces completely is the final point of Frederick W. Kagan's article, "Ghosts Against Hinds," available through the United States Army's Internet home page via the Military Academy site and selected for the special section on the Afghanistan war. The article compares the Soviet failure in Afghanistan with the possibilities for American success. Several articles and collections of maps on the subject of Afghanistan were available at the site presumably to help American soldiers and anyone else learn about Afghanistan, its sociology, history, geography, and the possibility of changing its destiny by outside force. Far from displaying ignorance and naïveté on the part of U. S. Military personnel, the cluster of sites called up by the Army's home page displays a good deal of scholarship, and the desire to diffuse that scholarship rapidly. Some areas of the site required special access codes but much was readily available.<sup>17</sup>

Kagan's article focused on the Soviet defeat and related that failure to potential military dangers to Americans. First he wrote of the now familiar ethnic and tribal divisions among the Afghans that make it so difficult to back a dominant group from the outside that will be capable of forming a stable government. According to figures from 1980, the Pashtun comprised 6 million inhabitants out of a population of 15 million, making their participation necessary for any settlement in spite of their close association with the Taliban. At the same time the 3 million Tajiks and 1 million Uzbeks dominate the Northern Alliance that was already fighting the Taliban. Kagan warned that though it would be tempting for the United States to support the Northern Alliance, already in the field, a policy seeking a long term political solution in Afghanistan will require some Pashtun cooperation. The Soviets, for ideological and historic reasons, had been obliged to support a losing communist regime. Hence their war, very much like the American war in Vietnam, supported an impossible policy.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, "Ghosts Against Hinds," 2001, accessed through US Army education site on 9 November 2001. Seemingly, a new introduction was added to the original article that pre-dated the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. See also Odd Arne Westad, "Concerning the Situation in 'A': New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, <http://www.cwihp.si.edu/cwihplib.nsf/1>. Accessed through the US Army education site.

Kagan's second reason for Soviet defeat was the rough high mountainous geography of Afghanistan, which acts both to divide up large invading armies into small units vulnerable to guerrilla attack, and to squeeze large units into predictable channels, making them easy to ambush. Afghanistan's mountain borders permit clandestine passage into neighboring countries where the different ethnic groups of Afghanistan can easily find refuge and relief with neighbors, after an engagement, and from which they can easily return to fight again.<sup>18</sup>

The third reason for Soviet defeat that Kagan related to dangers to Americans, linked advanced Soviet military technology with asymmetries of death in the war. The Soviets relied on numerical superiority, and superior firepower. Kagan wrote that, "The Soviets also relied on firepower in an effort to minimize their own casualties—and it is essential to recognize that the Soviets in the 1980's were every bit as casualty-averse as the American Army is today." Kagan pointed out, however, that Soviet firepower was badly directed by badly trained soldiers. American firepower has been far better directed, often adjusted by special forces on the ground, even against "fleeting targets"—an improvement gained from the experience of the Gulf War.<sup>19</sup> According to reports, individual houses belonging to Qaida associates were destroyed in Kabul with little damage to neighbors.<sup>20</sup> Kagan further pointed out the mediocre physical condition of Soviet soldiers reluctant to leave their vehicles. As the Soviet war continued, very much along the lines of Vietnam, it became more and more difficult for the Soviet army to operate away from a few cities they controlled because their indiscriminate firepower had created enemies rather than destroying them. As seen by Soviet ground soldiers, the solution for this lack of control in the country was the application of ever more firepower.<sup>21</sup>

The most important mistake of all that the Soviets made, according to Kagan, was "their inability to adjust their notions of victory and success to unfamiliar circumstances. The most significant difficulty facing a counter-guerrilla force in Afghanistan's terrain (and, indeed, in most terrain) is that

<sup>18</sup> Kagan cites Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "Prospects for Closing the Afghan-Pakistani Border," 8 July 1981, in Steven R. Galster, ed., *Afghanistan: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1973-1990* (Alexandria, Virginia: Chadwyck-Healey).

<sup>19</sup> Scales, *Certain Victory*, 365.

<sup>20</sup> See John Pomphret, "In the Mullah's Splendid Residence, Clues to the War," *International Herald Tribune*, 12 December 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Kagan, "Ghosts Against Hinds," 4.

of bringing the guerrillas to battle on your own terms. Once the guerrillas have been forced to fight, by whatever means, it is essential to destroy the guerrilla force in its entirety."<sup>22</sup> In conventional war, Kagan wrote, victory is determined by territory and objectives taken and the destruction of the enemy unit's combat effectiveness. The Soviet army of the 1980's would claim victory when the enemy units had suffered 10% or 20% casualties. The Soviets would have destroyed their enemy's combat capabilities for a time, but highly motivated and loosely organized, even in the absence of their leaders, the guerrilla units could soon be back. By not counting correctly, the Soviets made the same mistake in Afghanistan as Americans made in Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

In an article that provides encouragement and solutions to conditions in Afghanistan, Kagan described tactics capable of cutting off the retreat routes of guerrillas completely, using air assault reserves for "rapid insertion into an ongoing fight."<sup>24</sup> The tactics described by Kagan would require "daunting, and extensive training," but they do not seem beyond the capabilities of the new American reformed army with its "airland battle doctrine," and remarkable training programs.<sup>25</sup> Kagan proposed total destruction of the enemy while losing as few Americans as possible.

What effects this analysis of the necessity of total destruction of enemy guerrilla forces may have already had is difficult to tell. But given the lessons of Vietnam, where kill ratios and body counts were supposed to lead up to the gradual loss of the North Vietnamese will to fight, it is easy to see the logic of Kagan's argument, and equally easy to see the emotional and public relations necessity for obscuring the numbers of enemy dead and their comparison with the numbers of America dead. American dead should be honored and remembered for patriotic reasons and to keep up the moral of the American forces. The enemy's soldiers should be forgotten as they were in numbers of "killed tanks," of the Gulf War, rather than killed men in Vietnam.

From the point of view of American military culture, this asymmetry in the treatment of casualties is completely legitimate. The reformed Army's successful recruiting slogan, a slogan that easily carries a message to the entire organization, is "An Army of One." What this slogan suggests is that

<sup>22</sup> Kagan, "Ghosts Against Hinds," 5.

<sup>23</sup> For more on counting the enemy, see Sam Adams, *The War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalston, Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Kagan, "Ghosts Against Hinds," 6.

<sup>25</sup> Scales, *Certain Victory*, "Airland Battle Doctrine," 25-27.

every man or woman in the Army carries within himself or herself the essence—training, expertise, spirit—of the whole organization. At the same time, it means that the Army makes one, large organic or sometimes, mechanic, whole. With either interpretation of the message, the loss of any member becomes a loss for the whole, yet the organization can reconstitute itself with only a very few of these paragons of training and spirit. The army must be able to rebuild from a few because it has already been reduced to far below the number of effectives during the Cold War. This is an army of survivors, not only of defeat in Vietnam, but also of reform and budget and personnel cuts associated with the end of the Cold War. Its culture is one of constant transformation towards something ever more powerful and more efficient, that trains each member to his or her utmost. There is no room for the distinctions of the “old army” between volunteers and draftees, between national guardsmen and regular army, between men and women. Even the distinction between officers and “men” fades in military literature in which everyone is invited to be a “leader,” and the word officer almost never appears.<sup>26</sup> In such a culture the loss of anyone is a loss for everyone and must be remembered and honored by everyone.<sup>27</sup>

From the strategic point of view of the United States, this asymmetry is legitimate as well. The war cannot be fought to bring the enemy to the negotiating table in the sense of conventional wars fought between recognized states. Recognized states, using war as the “continuation of policy,” to use the phrase coined by Carl von Clausewitz in *On War* after the Napoleonic wars, leave the negotiating table to pursue their policies by violence, and then return to the table when the situation has become altered in their favor or left them too vulnerable to continue.<sup>28</sup> The terrorist use of violence, disconnected from mandated political power and

<sup>26</sup> The reading list provided by the Army Chief of Staff illustrates this point nicely. The list is divided into four parts for different ranks having more to do with age echelons than with the distinction between officers and others. The list for junior personnel, men and women in their late teens and early twenties, includes some fast moving well-researched novels, memoirs and histories written from the point of view of individual combatants. It is suggested for “Cadets, Soldiers, and Junior NCO’s.” Among the West Point Cadets, of course, will be found the future commanders of the Army.

<sup>27</sup> For the unity and solidarity of the new army culture and the ongoing project of reform, see the speeches and articles of Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki, especially “The Army Vision: A Status Report,” in Army Magazine Green Book, available at <http://www.ausa.org/www/greenbook>.

<sup>28</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *De la guerre* (Paris: Perrin, 1999), first published in Germany in 1832, not well known in the United States until the twentieth century, but prominent on the Army Chief of Staff’s Reading list “For Senior Leaders Above Brigade.”

having only violence as means to pursue policy, places the negotiating table always well behind the foreground of violent action or confused with the violence. Any national military action against terrorists will tend to return the monopoly of violent force to nations. Any military action of the United States will be fought to reestablish American dominance in that field. Naming the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon “acts of war” before knowing for certain against whom that war should have to be fought, was already an attempt by the United States to return violence to a realm where it can win. American military culture will always wish to wrest legitimacy away from practitioners of the “diplomacy of violence,” used by terrorists, but that was also suggested in the word “compellence,” of Vietnam era strategic thinking. The United States military will always set out to win decisively.

In an era when only the United States boasts that decisive capacity, this ability to pursue total victory can produce the asymmetries of opinion quantified in Brian Knowlton’s *International Herald Tribune* article already mentioned, but everywhere visible in the press outside the United States.<sup>29</sup> Other countries, even allies to the United States, are tempted by the more limited “diplomacy of violence,” that the United States has rejected. When France places a diplomat at the head of its service of military strategy, it must be a signal that France has placed its military in a subordinate position to diplomats and has no intention of engaging in a decisive war in the manner of the United States. When a general in Brussels says that European forces are not interested in “Warfighting,” the alternative is the limited deployment of violence for diplomatic gains. Such differences leave the American military isolated in its special, and at the moment, victorious culture of successful decisive engagement where the military delivers the negotiating positions to the politicians and diplomats. American unilateral decisions are an inevitable result, objectionable as that may be to allies.

The surviving officers of the United States Vietnam war probably understand isolation as well as anyone. Their careers have been spent reforming the current U. S. Army in the face of negative public opinion and a strategic consensus that has called into doubt the purpose of overwhelming force. Their pride resides in having proved themselves right to their own satisfaction in Panama, Grenada, and then more significantly in the Gulf War and now in Afghanistan. The United States military can and

<sup>29</sup> See Brian Knowlton, “How the World Sees the U.S. and Sept. 11,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 20, 2001.

does deliver decisive victories according to official military historians such as Brig. Gen. Robert H. Scales, Jr. in *Certain Victory: The U. S. Army in the Gulf War*, a book not only about the Gulf War, but the post Vietnam reforms and the series of successful military engagements of the United States since the military nadir of the 1970's. Violence can succeed without being diplomatic.

How political masters manage the negotiations after victories stays a separate matter. The reformed military prides itself on its public and conscientious subordination to the elected Federal Government. The small group of four star generals who direct the United States Army, among the few Vietnam veterans left in the military, have a lively memory of the disastrous lack of candor between the Congress and General Westmoreland. They remember the growing mistrust between the American public and the military through the Vietnam years. American military culture for the moment is balanced between the competence and reputation of elite forces created for highly-specialized operations involving technologically-sophisticated equipment yet who are led by men who maintain a humble stance of subordination to civil authority.<sup>30</sup>

The spectacle of unrivaled United States military power and the asymmetries it produces causes concern as the United States tends towards unilateral policies. Most likely, the United States Military leadership will face down criticisms from outside, while maintaining strict obedience to its political superiors, a situation that will not inspire confidence abroad. The real worry, however, is not the military held in check at the moment by its culture of subordination and memories of Vietnam: defeat by a technologically and numerically inferior enemy, and separation from the approbation of the American people. The real danger lies in a conservative political culture headed by people who have forgotten that defeat of an Army in which they had not wished to serve, and now think of as invincible. Republican leaders since Ronald Reagan, most of whom avoided the draft in the Vietnam days, blame the Vietnam defeat on a liberal society that withdrew its support from the military while pursuing domestic social equality through the Civil Rights Movement and Affirmative action. Maintaining a powerful consensus behind military

<sup>30</sup> This attitude to civil authority is most evident, not unexpectedly, in testimony of senior military personnel before Congress, but is also described at length in Scales, *Certain Victory* and in Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers*, as an important part of the military ethos reinforced by a conscious attempt to avoid the "credibility gap" of the Westmoreland years.

activities, keeping the population focused on the horrors of September 11, 2001 and the need to prevent the repetition of such events and avenge such events suits an anti-liberal agenda that repudiates the Vietnam years, while ignoring the importance of that defeat in creating the military tool those political leaders now have at their disposal. The ironic situation in the George W. Bush cabinet of Secretary of State, Colin Powell, the dovish military man, Donald Rumsfeld, the hawkish civilian Secretary of Defense is explained by their differing stances towards Vietnam. Powell knows that it took defeat to build the army into the highly trained, high moral organization it is today, and that the memory of Vietnam protects the military from falling into certain traps. Rumsfeld sees only a means of erasing the memory of the Vietnam days through the successful deployment of today's forces.

For the moment, the remarkably powerful army can keep its constitutionally appointed place in subordination to civil authority. But civil authority, in the Administration of George W. Bush, and his attorney general John Ashcroft, seem bent on using military authority as a model for non-military matters. For example, the proposal of "Military tribunals," for people accused of terrorist acts and the suspension of civil rights for those thus accused is presented by the Administration as a necessary act during a military emergency. In fact, however, it is a sign of executive usurpation of powers pretending to use the example of military efficiency. The proposed exceptional "Military tribunals," will be carried out according to exceptional rules, that is to say, according to rules established by the Bush administration for this special case, not according to the established Code of Military Justice, which offers many of the protections of American civil justice including recourse to appeals courts and the supreme court. But this is an example of the current conservative political culture in action, rather than that of the reformed military. The reformed military will wish to attract as little attention as possible to enemy casualties, including judicially prosecuted casualties, of this war.