Title: The Evolving American Way of War

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This paper will discuss the evolution of the idea of a national 'way of war.' This term has provoked much controversy among academics and military professionals for several decades. Despite consensus that a way of war combines military attitudes and assumptions (often termed military culture), national strategic ends and means, and historic examples, there is little agreement. Thus, references to "way of war" may have multiple connotations—military, cultural, historic, applicatory, and advocatory—some of which may be mutually incompatible.

Focusing on the evolution of the 'American way of war,' this paper argues that, in both the past and the present, the term has been used as much to advance political or military agendas as to provide a means of historical analysis. With few exceptions, until the Vietnam War, the discussion over a national way of war was generally limited to military officers more interested in criticizing national security policy than in historical veracity. In their narrative, an ignorant populace and shortsighted politicians kept the US in a perpetual state of military unpreparedness, thus ensuring that every war would begin with defeat and humiliation. In 1973, American scholar Russell F. Weigley challenged this view. His book, *The American Way of War*, argued that US military policy had evolved from attrition to annihilation. Weigley's thesis was adopted, though often perverted, by advocates who argued that new technology provided the means for a "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA) that would allow the US military to break the attrition-annihilation model and wage quick, decisive, cheap, and virtually bloodless wars. RMA Supporters argued that by networking the technology of the Information Age--computers, sensors, satellites, internet, and so on—geographically dispersed military forces could synchronize their movements and firepower, deploy quickly, and just as quickly overwhelm their opponents.

This RMA-New American Way of War view influenced the post-Cold War US military's embrace of idealized, techno-centric, scientific formulas—such as Network Centric Warfare or Effects Based Operations. In 1998, the US Department of Defense's blueprint for the future, *Vision 2010* declared that "today, the world is in the midst of an RMA sparked by leap-ahead advances in information technologies." The document boasted that by using "information superiority" to "leverage" the "capabilities" of other technologies, the US armed forces would achieve "dominant awareness of the battlespace." For America's opponents, *Joint Vision 2010* promised only rapid and decisive defeat. This document became the intellectual foundation of the armed forces' reform: 'transformation' initiatives that sought to secure missions, budgets, and equipment for the post-Cold War environment. *Army Vision 2010*, for example, stated that the US Army's goal was "achieving full spectrum dominance" through a host of new technologies, operational methods, and skilled personnel. Convinced that all future wars would be short and decisive—and decisiveness would be measured entirely in the destruction of enemy military forces—the services placed little value on creating strategic leaders. A selective and ideological interpretation of the "American Way of War" may have also justified the assumption of the George W. Bush administration that the United States could fight quick and cheap wars to topple unfriendly regimes, destroy terrorist networks, and spread American influence.

In recent years, the American Way of War debate has taken on new life thanks to a number of alternative interpretations. Anthony Echevarria, among others, laments that rather than a way of war, the US armed forces have become fixated on a "way of battle" that makes operational

excellence an end to itself.   Another critique, mounted by proponents of the counterinsurgency mission, seeks to establish a history-based American Way of Irregular Warfare. The recent Army Operating Concept, *Win in a Complex World* (2014), rejects the formulaic certainties of *Army Vision 2010* and emphasizes that victory occurs at the strategic level and that military forces must adapt to a wide variety of missions, opponents, and environments. In contrast, the Navy and Air Force insist that Iraq and Afghanistan were aberrations and advocate the same technology-centric 'way of war' of *Joint Vision 2010.* Thus, discussion of the American way of war, and the continuing debate over both its historical veracity and current relevance is still part of the national security dialogue.

This paper, based on both the primary sources used for my book *The Echo of Battle* (2007) and the debate generated by the Iraq-Afghanistan conflicts, will provide an overview of the American Way of War in both past and current military writing. It will demonstrate that the term has always been politicized and advocatory, and will discuss some of the major schools of interpretation and how each has used history to justify its agenda. It will conclude with a recommendation that rather than work backwards from historical events to determine the origins of a 'way of war', military analysts should devote more attention to the concepts, theories, and visions of war articulated by peacetime military intellectuals. It will contrast the American debate with the definitions of 'ways of war' proposed by scholars of other armed forces.