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BOOK REVIEW

“A Hero To Most”: The Postwar Pathologies of America’s Atomic Army

Brian McCallister Linn. *Elvis’s Army: Cold War GIs and the Atomic Battlefield*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 464 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover).

Brian McAllister Linn’s book uses the induction of rock and roll icon Elvis Presley into the U.S. Army from 1958 to 1960 as a framing device with which to explore the wrenching changes that gripped the army in the two decades that followed the end of World War II. Linn’s study of this under-examined period within the history of the U.S. military is well-sourced and delivered with nuance and subtlety. The result is a work that is at time perhaps inadvertently damning not only of the U.S. Army, but also of the entire Cold War American national security state. Linn is never polemical and consistently sympathetic to the dilemmas that those tasked with building and serving in the U.S. land-based fighting force faced in the early atomic era. But the picture of the army that emerges from this account is one of a chronically dysfunctional, ineffective, and demoralized organization hamstrung not only by its many internal defects, but also by the farcical nuclear doctrine of the early Cold War and the monumental task of policing American hegemony from Berlin to Seoul. Military historians of the Cold War will find much of interest in this book, but so too will those seeking a case study in the pathologies of the Cold War American national security state.

Despite the nod to cultural history in the title, the bulk of this book is an exceedingly thorough if conventional organizational history of the U.S. Army in the early Cold War. *Elvis’s Army* unfolds in chronological fashion, beginning with the post-World War II demobilization. One obvious challenge facing the army in the aftermath of World War II was how to adapt to the new realities of the atomic age. Even at the dawn of the nuclear era, it was clear that these new weapons posed a major threat to the kind of massed land formations that had traditionally been at the heart of the army’s strategy. Long before potential adversaries could develop such weapons, however, the army faced challenges from other services as well as from the executive branch. While the Korea War temporarily “saved” the army from its postwar doldrums and spurred massive

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increases in both manpower and equipment, the fundamental question of how to adapt the service to the nuclear age remained unanswered.

During the 1950s, army leadership, most notably Chief of Staff General Maxwell B. Taylor, made a concerted effort to adapt the service's training, rhetoric, and procurement to survive in the new landscape that the bomb created. From altering the structure of army units in the short-lived "pentomic" reorganization scheme to developing a whole range of tactical nuclear weapons and conducting exercises intended to simulate the atomic battlefield, the army made a great show of asserting its continued relevance. McAllister credits these efforts with having been "original, innovative, and important," but the bulk of the evidence he presents in this book points more towards his caveat that the army's atomic reinvention was "sometimes more marketing than strategy" (74). Coupled with a fundamental confusion over what purpose "tactical" nuclear weapons were to serve on the battlefield was an expensive and poorly thought out rush to procure them that resulted in millions of dollars spent on systems, "[m]any [of which] were so flawed that their only value was in generating publicity" (130). The apotheosis of this atomic insanity was the "Davy Crockett," a squad-level recoilless rifle that fired a nuclear bomb. McAllister recounts "[r]umors that its blast radius exceeded its range led many to dub it a suicide weapon," and agrees that the Davy Crockett "was justifiably regarded by its crews as more dangerous to them than to the Soviets (111, 303). Even when it was not directly placing its own soldiers at risk, the army's race towards the nuclear future undermined the service in more subtle ways. McAllister documents how the "focus on high-profile weapons came at the expense of developing complete systems to support these weapons" (114). By the early 1960s, the entire exercise was essentially rendered moot as army war planners concluded that "nuclear firepower has outweighed the capability for maneuver" (97).

The second overriding challenge that occupies much of McAllister's account is that of adapting the army from a small, volunteer force (as it had been prior to World War II) to a mass organization built on conscription. The resumption of the Selective Service Act in 1948 and its subsequent extensions and revisions provided the army with a steady supply of manpower to fill out its ranks. It also created immense challenges, however, because the army, an organization that had previously relied on long-serving Regular Army officers and men, had to adapt to the churn of hundreds of thousands of young men, most of whom would serve the minimum two years and then leave the service. Many draftees "went into uniform unwillingly, resented their forced service, and tolerated Regular Army authority grudgingly" (55). Class, regional, racial, and ethnic divisions exacerbated these tensions as the army became "the only place where members of every ethnic group, college graduates and illiterates, rich and poor, urban and rural, had to live, work, train, and if necessary fight together" (5).

Though the army succeeded at the most basic level in making the transition to conscription—and even had a few highpoints, including a successful campaign to combat illiteracy within the ranks—the picture that McAllister paints is

far from rosy. From “widespread evidence of animosity between GIs and officers that came close to class warfare” to corruption (particularly at the officer level), tensions between Regular Army soldiers and conscripts, and the “toxic personal relationships between the army’s leaders,” at times it seems a miracle that the institution survived at all (18, 102). Linn is unrelentingly critical of “the service’s tendencies toward centralization of authority, perpetual review, and over-supervision,” as well as the army’s attempts to sell conscripts on service by portraying it as a kind of alternative career path akin to those in the private sector (186).

In a somewhat discordant concluding chapter on the army in the era of Kennedy, Linn attempts to offer a redeeming coda to his story. While acknowledging the ongoing problems that would plague the army during the Vietnam debacle, he asserts that, “In both the Berlin and Cuban crises, soldiers demonstrated the merits of flexible response, showing the nation’s resolve while averting thermonuclear retaliation. Thus by most definitions of military transformation . . . the Kennedy era was a success” (332). While the bulk of *Elvis’s Army* is carefully argued and well-supported, this conclusion seems tenuous as there is little if any evidence that the army played any meaningful role in the resolution of either of these two Kennedy-era crises. The larger question haunting this book is whether any organization could have successfully navigated the demands placed up it by American Cold War nuclear and conventional strategy.

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