Review of Brian Linn's *Elvis' Army*

This is part of an ongoing series of reviews written by Temple graduate students of new books considering the study of force, diplomacy, and international history. These reviews will be posted on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The books you’ll see reviewed here are brand new -- they often haven’t made it into the pages of major scholarly journals yet, allowing our reviewers to get their say in before the dust has settled. If you would like to participate as a reviewer, or have a book to suggest, please contact Brian McNamara, CENFAD's Thomas J. Davis Fellow, at brian.mcnamara@temple.edu.


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In *Elvis's Army*, Brian McAllister Linn explores the U.S. Army’s preparations for atomic conflict between the end of World War II and the 1960s. He contends that people, not organizational structures or technologies, have been the primary determinants of military performance. Tracing the Army’s efforts to adapt in the nuclear age, Linn persuasively concludes that these initiatives faltered because they “ignored the human element.” (337) His previous book, *The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War* (Cambridge, 2007), examined the early Cold War Army within an assessment of military doctrine throughout American history. *Elvis’s Army*, an example of “War and Society” scholarship, employs a broader investigative lens that should appeal to historians in many different fields.

Linn argues that the Army faced serious dilemmas following the Second World War: rapid demobilization, heavy-handed commanders, a competitive civilian job market, and an exodus of volunteers. These factors mandated the 1948 reinstatement of the draft. Simultaneous advertising campaigns casting the service as a career unfortunately attracted personnel seeking job security and learning opportunities, “not…to command soldiers in combat.” (33) The Army struggled to reassert its relevance given outdated doctrine, tepid Pentagon support, and an Air Force proclaiming its utility in atomic delivery. Although the Korean War sparked an overhaul, from racial integration to perpetual European troop deployments, the Army ascribed missteps to enlistee failures rather than acknowledging its inadequate materiel and reliance on unenthusiastic reservists. Locked in “a siege mentality,” (74) it drew on the Korean experience to reject aerial nuclear bombardment as immoral and advocate for tactical nuclear weapons solely on the battlefield.

Linn demonstrates that technological and human limitations compromised the Army’s pivot to new equipment and restructuring. The Eisenhower administration’s embrace of massive retaliation engendered significant budget reductions, forcing the Army to adopt the streamlined pentomic organizational system. This featured smaller, highly mobile units reliant on nuclear weapons to reduce the Soviet numerical advantage, but “created a near catastrophe, combining equipment, maintenance, and personnel problems in such volume that it is truly remarkable the army did not implode.” (126) Innovations to ensure battlefield success and bolster the service’s forward-thinking image proved impractical; missiles, for example, were costly and required individual, sophisticated components for which the logistical system was unprepared.

Turning to the subject of personnel, Linn notes that a scarcity of highly qualified enlistees and the costliness of reservists necessitated the draft, producing “the most racially, regionally, culturally, and educationally diverse peacetime force in the nation’s history.” (143-144) Officers, however, faced pressure to elevate their own standards, and suffered a three-way “generational fissure...as great as any divisions by grade, race, region, education, or draftee versus Regular status within the enlisted ranks.” (166) The author blames presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy for vacillating quotas that divided officers between successful careerists and subordinates with few chances for promotion. Reservists and Reserve Officers’ Training Corps graduates, inexperienced and uninterested in a lengthy commitment, responded to a shortfall of young, lower-ranking officers exacerbated by West Point’s poor academic rigor, the expense of Officer Candidate School, and an ineffective performance evaluation system. Linn contends that the Army suffered a steady loss of officers because it “had promised them opportunities to lead and instead made them bureaucrats.” (189) Increased personnel requirements compromised basic training, while large-scale nuclear warfare simulations revealed tension between the leadership’s desire for oversight and the service’s principle of decentralized initiative. The author avoids generalizations. While domestic units needed further training and logistical support, and those deployed in Korea struggled with outdated equipment and troop reductions, “after Vietnam, veterans and reformers alike would look back to [American troops in] 1950s Germany for inspiration.” (217)
*Elvis’s Army* explores the service’s cultural initiatives, which aimed to rally civilian support and secure funding by distributing news to local media, offering interviews, and holding military post open houses. Such activities could expose friction in civil-military relations. The 1956 “revolt of the colonels” rejected Eisenhower’s budget outlook and illustrated “how far officers in the Pentagon would go to undercut their rivals and secure a larger share of the defense budget.” (250) The Army collaborated extensively with filmmakers, but it remained sensitive to unfavorable portrayals of service life, as well as plots exacerbating period sensibilities regarding women and African Americans in uniform. Promulgating “unglamorous” and “old-fashioned” themes, the Army’s 1960 Project MAN replaced its newly forged modern image by centering on the demanding nature of ground fighting. (267)

Surveying educational and moral programming, Linn highlights the achievements and shortfalls of “the army’s atomic transformation...[which] anticipated the ethical rearmament of the individual soldier.” (272) These preparations fostered technical competence and vigilance against the ideological dangers of communism in Cold War America. Religious observance did not markedly improve, but soldiers embraced schooling opportunities, fostering the idea “that the service could and should teach the disadvantaged.” (283) The Army even organized libraries, concerts, and sports to encourage morally upstanding leisure activity.

Linn emphasizes continuities during the shift from massive retaliation to flexible response in the 1960s. Abandoning nuclear weapons, the Army’s limited war doctrine remained otherwise intact. Unfortunately, equipment issues, micromanagement, and a dearth of both officers and recruits also persisted. The author attributes this uneven performance to an ongoing imposition of technological solutions to human problems. Advocates for revolutions in military affairs over the successive decades “largely restricted their focus to concepts, equipment, and organizations,” (335) overlooking historical precedent. Comparing the Army of the 1950s and the present, he emphasizes their mutual exposure to combat, age divisions among officers, and materiel challenges.

Organized thematically, *Elvis’s Army* reflects Linn’s exhaustive research in the National Archives as well as military source repositories (e.g. West Point, the War Department, Fort Leavenworth), presidential libraries, oral histories, personal correspondence, professional journals, and periodicals. He cites from secondary literature ranging in publication from the mid-twentieth century to the present, yet the book would have benefited from explicit historiographic engagement. Noting the disinterest among military professionals and the public over the early Cold War Army, the author neither challenges extant works nor identifies an academic lacuna. Furthermore, while Linn considers the impact of race and gender, he does not justify his decision to intersperse references to those issues throughout the text rather than expounding on them in separate chapters. These observations little detract from a highly convincing work of scholarship. The author has shown the potential of “War and Society” to incorporate cultural, social, technological, and strategic analysis into a volume of wide-ranging academic appeal.