

Where are the Arleigh Burkes Today?

By MARK YOST

Arleigh Burke made a name for himself—“31-knot Burke”—as a hard-charging destroyer squadron commander in the Pacific theater during World War II. He went on to be the only chief of naval operations to serve three terms, and along the way he oversaw the construction of nuclear carriers, ballistic missile submarines, and highly mobile amphibious forces. But it was earlier, as a captain, that Burke showed his real mettle in a military culture quite different from today’s.

In the aftermath of the war, senior military leaders vigorously debated our strategic posture. The Air Force, recently separated from the Army and with the support of President Truman, held that bombers had been the decisive factor in the war and would be the best force to win the peace.

The Navy had other ideas. The keel had just been laid for *USS United States*, the first so-called super carrier. The Navy thought that forward-deployed carrier battle groups were the best means of projecting American power. A spirited debate ensued over whether the Air Force with its doctrine of strategic bombing or the Navy with its carriers could do the job better.

“The Army Air Force is tired of being a subordinate outfit and is no longer going to be a subordinate outfit,” declared Brigadier General Frank Armstrong in 1947. “It was a predominant force during the war. It is going to be a predominant force during the peace, and you may as well make up your minds, whether you like it or not, that we do not care whether you like it or not: The Army Air Force is going to run the show.”

The Navy was no less gracious, calling Air Force doctrine on strategic bombing “childish” and labeling the B-36 a “billion dollar blunder.” Helping to make the case was Burke, who headed the organizational research and policy division (OP-23) in the office of chief of naval operations. There he and his staff began to get the best of the Air Force with strategy papers that bolstered the argument for carrier forces. As a result, Burke’s staff was put under veritable house arrest with the arrival of the inspector general and Marine security guards. But their views had the backing of senior admirals, many well-known, such as Ernest King and Chester Nimitz. This fracas almost cost Burke his career and was part of what became known as “the revolt of the admirals.”

Not long after the revolt began, North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel. U.S. forces then made their famous landing at Inchon, and the debate over the utility of carriers was put to rest. This brief account points out how the strategic issues facing the United States then were much the same as now, although the environment is totally different. In the late 1940s, the Armed Forces were largely unchallenged in a world that had just witnessed the end of a global conflict between the forces of good and evil. Then the Nation was

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struggling to redefine its role—as well as that of its military—as the strategic landscape underwent a rapid transformation. While the budget deficit of that day, twice the gross domestic product, had been a small price to pay for defeating the Axis, it nonetheless resulted in a dramatic decline in defense spending and a struggle among the services over shrinking resources.

Today the strategic situation is much the same. The United States is largely unchallenged. In the aftermath of the Cold War the Nation is struggling to redefine its role as the only superpower and the role its military should play in the world. And today, a budget deficit nowhere near the size of the one following World War II is pressuring the services to do more with less.

But there is one significant difference between the post-World War II era in which Burke flourished and today: the absence of vigorous debate over national security and military strategy. Imagine an Air Force general speaking as candidly today as General Armstrong did in 1947. It is almost unheard of. Certainly policy and strategic issues are hotly contested behind closed doors at the Pentagon, and service staffs are fully aware of the stakes in current budgetary maneuvers. But the military no longer has intellectual debates like those in the wake of World War II. Why?

Based on discussions with military leaders, service planners, defense analysts, and—most importantly—junior officers, a disturbing image emerges. There is no vigorous debate because the emphasis today is on jointness. Strategy has become so politicized that making a strong case for the capabilities of any one service—even when not openly pillorying the others—is taboo.

“I would seriously think twice about publishing an article in, say, *Proceedings* or another professional journal that didn’t have a strong joint theme or made a strong case for the tactics and strategies of one service,” said a Navy officer who asked not to be identified. “Even if I didn’t attack another service, the clear rule is that if you’re not advocating joint warfighting, you might as well not say anything. If you do, it’s going to irreparably hurt or possibly end your career.”

Why have the Armed Forces strayed from the open, vigorous debates of Burke’s day to the stifling environment described above? John Lehman, the outspoken former Secretary of the Navy, suggests that the basic attitude of “go along to get along” is fostered in the minds of junior officers. “When a young officer comes out of OCS

or one of the service academies, he quickly learns the rules of the game,” Lehman says. “Don’t rock the boat. Don’t take a risk that may result in you getting a ‘B’ on your evals, and spend as much time in Washington as you can, preferably in a joint billet. . . . The net result of all this is that junior officers aren’t learning to be warfighters anymore, they’re learning to be staff fighters.”

Tom Linn, a lieutenant colonel assigned to Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, and one of the few sources who would go on record, agrees with Lehman. “We’re sending a terrible message to junior officers today. When I was a junior officer, you were encouraged to go out on a limb, think out of the box. As a young lieutenant you were supposed to make mistakes. And you were encouraged to learn from them. Today, everyone’s so fearful of getting a ‘B’ on their evals that they don’t take risks. I’m sorry to say that it has given us an officers corps that avoids risks, is self-centered and career oriented, and that possesses few independent thinking skills.”



GEN John W. Vessey, Jr.

Senator John McCain, a Naval Academy graduate who comes from a distinguished line of sailors (to include a grandfather who served with Burke in the Pacific), concurs with Lehman that today’s atmosphere inhibits junior officers but points out it is nothing new. “I’m sorry to say that this stifling of debate is heavily indoctrinated into the officer corps and has been for some time now. You can clearly see it from the Joint Chiefs and other senior Pentagon leaders right down through the ranks. The Joint Chiefs today, I hate to say it, are very dedicated, very hardworking, very unimaginative people. They’ve gotten where they are because they learned their lesson early on not to rock the boat and make waves for the administration.”

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A few maverick officers have succeeded through a combination of skill and outspokenness. But they are the exception. One is General John Vessey, USA, who served as the Chairman under President Reagan. Going into the 1980 presidential campaign, the White House put out the word that the Joint Chiefs and other senior officers were expected to publicly support Salt II. Under no circumstances would opposition to the agreement be tolerated. "One of the few holdouts was John Vessey, who was in Europe at the time," Lehman notes. "He knew Salt II was a bad treaty for us, and regardless of what the administration thought, he wasn't going to support it. When Reagan came into office he reviewed everyone's record and saw that Vessey was one of the few who hadn't shilled for the Carter administration. That was enough for Reagan: he made Vessey the Chairman."

Mavericks have not fared so well of late. One is General Merrill McPeak, former chief of staff of the Air Force. After the "Bottom-Up Review" appeared, McPeak testified before Congress that the review was an "abstraction, the budget a reality." And on plans to cut forces, he indicated that they were "designed by someone who must be in a position of not having to take responsibility for the combat results." Later, as the Commission on the Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces deliberated, he publicly defended the Air Force doctrine on strategic bombing and virtual presence. "The Joint Chiefs are just caretakers," McPeak recently confided. "That's who they look for now. Just like the message that's sent to the junior officers. It's really very stifling and none of the services do too much innovative thinking today because of it. The Marines tend to think out of the box a little bit. . . . The others, especially the Army, are, well—unimaginative, to say the least."

If even senior officers fall victim to prevailing culture, what is the solution? Perhaps more importantly, where did the spirit of the revolt of the admirals end and one of near total compliance with civilian leadership pick up? Certainly the senior leadership of the Armed Forces must accept some blame. While military officers have always been aware of their constitutional obligation to defer to civilian control, they have an equal responsibility to safeguard the Nation. There must be ways of doing that without being insubordinate.

But in fairness, civilian leaders must also accept some of the blame. Like every bureaucrat who gets a taste for power, their penchant has been to consolidate it, often against the advice of experienced and knowledgeable senior military officers. But it is more than just bureaucrats in the Pentagon. Nearly every administration since Truman has tightened the grip on military leadership, which discourages debate. How did this situation arise? Some maintain that a relative attitude of complacency started when MacArthur was fired and others that it surfaced in Vietnam when senior officers fudged body counts to satisfy the objectives of decisionmakers. Observes C.W. Watson, a retired Army officer: "Unfortunately, somewhere along the way military officers have lost that tradition of resigning rather than carrying out orders that, while lawful, they fully know to be not in the best interest of our country and its defense."

"If we're going to change this culture, it really has to come from within the ranks," muses Tom Linn. "Senior officers who recognize the importance of innovative tactical and doctrinal thinking must encourage this in junior officers and, more importantly, protect them from those who might stifle them or sabotage their careers because of their outspoken views. That may lead to tensions among general officers, but it is a battle—possibly bloody—that must be waged to achieve the level of strategic and tactical thinking that helped to win the Cold War and made us the fighting force we are today."

Although this may sound like a call for another revolt of the admirals, the central question remains: Where are the Arleigh Burkes to lead an intellectual debate today?

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This essay is based on a series of interviews conducted by the author earlier this year.

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