

Letters

To the Editor—In *JFQ* 65, Air Force historian Phillip S. Meilinger wrote a provocative and informative article (“Admirals Run Amok: The Danger of Inter-Service Rivalry,” 2nd Quarter 2012) about the Navy’s institutional response during the unification efforts of the Truman administration and airpower advocates after World War II. This hastened a trend that resulted in the bulk of the defense budget going to the new U.S. Air Force by the end of the Korean War. One is always tempted to ask, “Why this topic, why this time?”

Andrew Bacevich argues that honest study of the past should inform the imperatives of the present—Meilinger’s article fits the bill.¹ But we are still left asking “why now?” On the face of it, as the last paragraph of the article makes clear, the occasion is the upcoming cutbacks in the Defense budget based on economic factors related to the Federal budget deficit. If the past is any guide, this dynamic tends to lead to a Service scramble over roles and missions to maintain capabilities that all honestly believe serve the national security and interest. However, a closer look reveals that the uniformed and civilian leadership of the Navy and Air Force seem institutionally and strategically aligned with a concept entitled Air-Sea Battle. If the Air Force and Navy (and maybe the Marine Corps) have found common cause, why introduce dissonance into the “alliance”?

The real issue here is the narrative over “unification.” This narrative has two primary versions, although it is the one being addressed by Meilinger that most folks know about or subscribe to. This first narrative sees unification of the Services as it was initiated by the Truman administration as a blessing—not an unmixed blessing, but a blessing nonetheless. After all, who can really argue with the merits of Jominian unity of command, or unity of effort, or whatever? There is another school of thought, and I am clearly on record in this very journal as being a part of that school, that instead finds unification a mixed blessing at best—and perhaps a curse (“Abolish the Office of Secretary of Defense?” 4th Quarter 2007).

The unification story, however, is somewhat peripheral to the main point of the article—which presents a fairly objective account of the “Revolt of the Admirals” until about page 94. Meilinger’s language subtly and then not-so-subtly changes as he begins to make his real argument in the piece—that Navy resistance to unification reflected “insubordination” that fundamentally established an environment of inter-Service rivalry (“serious blot”) and “distrust” that is still with us today—despite a lengthy history of Defense reforms to fix it (p. 96). Certainly Meilinger is correct in claiming that some in the Navy completely bought into the unproven concept that the Service was practically *irrelevant* (a bad word in times of declining budgets) if it did not have a piece of the nuclear strategic bombing mission. He also does an objective and fair job of showing that there were those in the Navy who were dishonest about the problems of the B-36; they were misguided and even unethical—but their fundamental claims about the B-36, as General George Kenney admitted (p. 93), had some merit. However, in using less-than-honorable methods these Navy partisans poisoned the atmosphere for a reasonable debate on Navy roles and missions in the post-World War II security environment for the United States. But there were other issues at stake as well.

Nuclear strategic bombing did not allow for a range of responses across the spectrum of war, and Admirals Chester Nimitz and Louis Denfeld both knew this and trumpeted it in the period after World War II. In his testimony, Denfeld clearly made the case for spending on the Navy, not only based on a strategic bombing mission, but also for the following reasons:

As a result, there is a steady campaign to relegate the Navy to a convoy and antisubmarine service, on the grounds that any probable enemy possesses only negligible fleet strength. This campaign results from a misunderstanding of the functions and capabilities of navies and from the erroneous principle of the self-sufficiency of air power. . . . Fleets have never in history met opposing fleets for any other

*purpose than to gain control of the sea—not as an end in itself, but so that national power could be exerted against the enemy.*²

Denfeld’s final sentence here makes a point many miss—the application of national power from the sea in all scenarios, to include conventional scenarios. Denfeld and many of the officers in the Navy were concerned that the very survival of capabilities essential to the Republic were at stake—capabilities unrelated to nuclear warfare. Moreover, Denfeld threw a strike directly at the new Service’s conception of its own identity in questioning the reputedly demonstrable efficacy of airpower when armed with the right weapons (nuclear weapons and long-range bombers). Truman bought into these ideas because they offered a savings on defense—he trusted the professionals to steer him correctly. Those professionals were the generals of the Army and the Air Force—for most part they were from the European theater of operations, where airpower had proved less than efficacious on a number of occasions.

Meilinger brings up the inconvenient truth of the Korean War and implies that it supports his case of poisoned Service relationships: “The Revolt of the Admirals caused a lingering ill will . . . the baleful maladies that unification of the armed forces was designed to correct. Worse still, less than a year later, the United States would be at war in Korea.” To the contrary, Korea proved an education and validation of what Denfeld and others had to say about the roles and missions of the Navy. At the outbreak of the Korean War, the Navy had only one active aircraft carrier in the Western Pacific and only two other large carriers available for the long deployment across the seas to the theater of operations.³ This theater comprised a peninsula jutting between the Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan that lent itself particularly well to all the benefits that “control of the sea—not as an end in itself, but” as “national power [that] could be exerted against the enemy” could give.

So why the article? Perhaps Meilinger’s goal here is to avoid having the U.S. Army

become the “odd man out” much in the way that happened to the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps after World War II. If so, he has a peculiar strategy using history as a case study for doing it. If not, then what *is* his purpose in conjuring up these “old ghosts”?

—John T. Kuehn, Ph.D.
Professor of Military History
U.S. Army Command and General
Staff College

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¹ Andrew J. Bacevich, “The Revisionist Imperative: Rethinking Twentieth Century Wars,” *The Journal of Military History* 76, no. 2 (April 2012), 333–342.

² Jeffery G. Barlow, *The Revolt of the Admirals* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1994), 253 (emphasis in original).

³ Jeffrey G. Barlow, *From Hot War to Cold: The U.S. Navy and National Security Affairs, 1945–1955* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 257–258 and chapter 14, *passim*.

The author’s response to Dr. Kuehn—I thank Professor Kuehn for writing such a serious letter regarding my article on the Revolt of the Admirals. His main concern seems to be the timing of the piece and implies that there is some sort of agenda present on my part due to the recent rapprochement between the Navy and Air Force. He implies that I am trying to scuttle that cooperation. Not at all. The timing is simply coincidental. The Naval History Office sent me some material on the Revolt, and the idea had been rattling around in my head for some time before I finally was able to sit down and write. If there is an issue of timing involved, it concerns upcoming Defense budget cuts; as noted, that is when inter-Service rivalry most often rears its ugly head. I hope that does not occur and intended the piece as a warning against it.

Thankfully, Professor Kuehn does not try to defend the indefensible. The Navy hierarchy was outrageously out of bounds in 1949, and no attempt at “push back” or talk of fairness in the budget debates of the time can excuse their behavior. Some within the Navy deliberately and maliciously slandered the chief of another Service, the secretary of another Service, and the Secretary of

Defense. There is absolutely no excuse for that insubordination. None. It is irrelevant if later events would seem to support some of their contentions: there were other methods, less reprehensible, than spreading libelous rumors against senior civilian and military leaders to make their case. That is the main argument of my article.

Regarding the B-36: it was not a great airplane, but it was the best heavy bomber in the world at the time. Thankfully, it was never needed for a war against the Soviet Union, but those who flew it—and there are countless testimonials from them—believed that it would get through to its targets in enemy territory with acceptable losses and fulfill the dictates of the national war plans. Its combination of speed, altitude, and electronic countermeasures—the last being of tremendous importance—convinced those veterans that the B-36 would do the job. Because it never went to war, the contentions for and against the big bomber’s combat capabilities must remain conjecture.

Incidentally, small point, the Air Force did *not* receive the bulk of Defense Department funds in 1949 as Professor Kuehn argues. That situation did not occur until after the Korean War when President Dwight Eisenhower announced his strategic policy of massive retaliation. I would note that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at that time was Admiral Arthur Radford.

The claim that the Navy was later proved correct (the importance of seapower in Korea) is the true non sequitur here. No naval witnesses in the congressional hearings that I can recall ever pushed the concept of the Navy using its carriers to carry out tactical airstrikes in a conventional, peripheral war. The argument that Denfeld saw seapower as “national power exerted against the enemy” is far too vague to qualify as a prediction for naval/marine tactical airpower. The Sailors were no more prescient than Soldiers or Airmen when it came to predicting what the next war would look like. I would note here that the B-29s of the Strategic Air Command played a significant role in Korea—a role that neither General Curtis LeMay nor anyone else in the military hierarchy anticipated. Necessity is indeed the mother of invention—for all the Services.

Unification was designed to smooth relations between the Services and introduce

nascent concepts of *jointness*—although that term was not then used. In an effort to save scarce funds, duplication and overlap were to be eliminated. Modern war—as proved abundantly in World War II—demanded joint command and cooperation. My comment (that is, the negative effect the Revolt would have on the Korean War, erupting less than a year after this unfortunate public brawl) was that the two Services were extremely distrustful and leery of each other. That is *not* the attitude one should have when going off to war when cooperation and jointness in both deed and spirit are so essential. Again, unification was intended to avoid such divisiveness, but the Revolt poisoned the waters. Even a cursory history of the Korean War will show that the Navy and Air Force had difficulty cooperating during the war, especially in air operations, and a large part of that difficulty was the hangover resulting from the congressional hearings.

Finally, regarding Professor Kuehn’s reference to the argument that minor redundancies can sometimes be beneficial is something that I have argued for quite some time. In my view, redundancy is the true American way of war, or, put more cynically, indecision is the key to flexibility. Since the 1950s, all administrations have been unable to make tough decisions regarding priorities in national defense, so we buy everything. Fortunately, the United States has been wealthy enough that it can afford to have the world’s best Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and special operations forces. What a nightmare of capabilities that presents to a potential adversary! Saying that, however, is not the same thing as saying that such redundancy is a blessing. Given our astonishing deficit situation, spending \$700 billion on defense each year might not be the best use of taxpayer dollars.

Again, thanks to Professor Kuehn for his excellent letter.

—Phillip S. Meilinger