When World War II ended, the United States Army demobilized. By 1948, the number of men and women in uniform had declined from 8,267,000 to 554,000. Leaders of the service had recommended that one million soldiers remain on active duty, along with several million trained reservists. But presidents Truman and Eisenhower, Congress, and a majority of U.S. citizens believed that atomic weapons and long-range bombers could offset the superiority of the Soviet Union in conventional forces and protect the nation’s security. That conclusion was not fundamentally shaken by the decision to put U.S. boots on the ground in the Korean War.

In this context, Brian McAllister Linn, a professor of history at Texas A&M University, reminds us that the U.S. Army tried to re-invent itself. In *Elvis’s Army*, Linn provides a detailed account of efforts by Army brass to recruit, equip, train, and retain personnel, align tactics and strategy to Cold War realities, and compete with the Navy and Air Force for budgetary appropriations and prestige.

In one respect, *Elvis’s Army* is a “bait and switch” offering: Mr. Presley, who was drafted in 1958 and served honorably, faithfully, and without complaint, makes but a few brief appearances. That said, Linn’s book is a valuable examination of—and a cautionary tale about—the challenges of identifying a role for soldiers on the atomic battlefield.

Throughout the 1950s, Linn points out, the U.S. Army was not a popular institution. A survey in 1955 revealed that only one in ten teenagers expressed an interest in enlisting. One in four thought that career soldiers stayed in service because they could not get good civilian jobs. Nor was the draft all that helpful in adding skilled individuals to the army. Throughout the decade, with deferments, exemptions, and rejections on physical, mental, and moral grounds, “the draft pool shrunk to a puddle” (p. 143). In January 1958, a mere 2,100,000 of almost 20,000,000 males who registered for the draft were classified 1-A. Both enlistees and inductees tended to be poorly educated,
poorly motivated, and determined to leave after they had received a modi-
cum of training. Among radar technicians, aircraft maintenance mechanics,
and communications personnel, the three-year turnover rate approached 100
percent. With retirements of World War II and Korean War veterans and a
steep decline in ROTC graduates remaining on active duty, moreover, the
Army faced shortages in the ranks of captain, major, and lieutenant colonel:
the very people it needed to organize, distribute, and maintain the high-tech
equipment of a “new age” military.

For much of the decade, Linn insists, the army spent precious resources
on an air-defense missile system whose “military utility was problematic.” In
1958, the cost of missiles equaled that of all other munitions. And “the gamble
of hitting the jackpot” with a superweapon delayed the development of tanks,
infantry vehicles, and helicopters, and impeded the recruitment and training
of enlisted men, volunteers, and officers (p. 108).

To its credit, Linn reveals, the army did take steps to improve the educational
and vocational skills of many soldiers. Recruits with minimum scores were
given intensive remedial courses to bring them up to a fourth-grade level in
reading, writing, and mathematics. At the end of the 1950s, about 60 percent
of the army’s 900,000 personnel were enrolled in at least one course. A high
school diploma was required for reenlistment or promotion to sergeant, with
a college degree mandated for officers. And the army established schools to
teach enlisted personnel “Military Occupational Specialties.”

Linn also provides interesting details about the integration of the army. To
address significant losses of combat forces during the Korean War, officers,
without waiting for authorization from headquarters, began to transfer black
soldiers to white units and to assign replacements based on needs, not race.
Despite opposition from some commanders, the policy remained in force. It
gained added traction in the ensuing years, Linn reports, because Europeans
pointed out that U.S. rhetoric on racial equality did not correspond with the
actual discriminatory practices they witnessed among American units stationed
on the continent. By the middle of the decade, all tactical units had a quota of
12 percent African Americans—the same percentage of blacks as in the popula-
tion of the United States—and all army organizations designed as “colored”
were de-activated. An especially effective approach, according to Linn, was
the decision to see to it that 20 percent of new arrivals to a unit were black,
so that most soldiers would never experience their group as anything other
than integrated. The revolution in race relations, one correspondent exulted,
“appears to be setting a pattern not yet equaled elsewhere, in our armed forces
or anywhere in the country” (p. 60).

Of course, desegregation did not eradicate prejudice. Linn documents the
difficulties black soldiers faced, especially during basic training in the Jim
Crow South, where they were often assigned inferior quarters and facilities
and faced openly hostile white civilians. Only one soldier in ten at Fort Polk, Louisiana, could remember a single positive encounter with a local citizen, he reveals. At Fort Jackson, South Carolina, black soldiers reported that wearing their uniforms in Columbia made them conspicuous targets. Incidents like these, in fact, prompted the army to provide the comforts of civilian life—including libraries, sports, and movies—on each post.

In any event, Linn attributes the success of desegregation—which became a source of pride for the army and provided inspiration to the civil rights movement—to the basic decency and sense of fairness of enlisted men, who proved to be “much more tolerant than many senior commanders” (p. 60). Not a single court-martial over a race-based incident, for example, occurred in the 1st Infantry Division. And Linn quotes one “Southern boy” who told an interviewer that “the amiability of the white and colored here is truly amazing. I heard men in processing camp say that they would refuse to live in the same barracks with a Negro. Those same men now have colored men sleeping next to them and they are getting along wonderfully. Prejudice is acquired, not inborn . . . and people who think they cannot get rid of it are mistaken” (p. 60). Surprisingly, perhaps, although Linn notes that the abolition of segregated units ended “a distinct African American military lineage, with its own traditions and culture, dating back to the Civil War” (p. 62), he does not include some of the less positive assessments by black and white soldiers of race relations in the barracks—or in the field.

As the Army sought to clarify its role, fulfill its obligations, and burnish its reputation, Linn points out, its leaders undertook a public relations campaign to reverse the pervasive image of the service as unglamorous, rigid, and obsolete. Army Chief of Staff Maxwell Taylor, a consummate pitch man, gave dozens of speeches, press conferences, and televised interviews arguing that the United States should not rely too much on its nuclear arsenal. Taylor replaced khaki with a green dress uniform that looked like a business suit and commissioned a new Army flag and official song. He authorized a public relations campaign that turned out to be a fiasco—“You and the Army Image”—to “activate the grass roots,” and he insisted on sexy and appealing nicknames for weapons. And to counter Air Force flyovers at football games, the Army staged demonstrations with tanks maneuvering, paratroopers descending, and cannons firing.

To attract favorable publicity, Linn adds, the brass made extensive use of the Women’s Army Corps, portraying WACs as young, pretty, and able to satisfy their sense of adventure and zeal for travel. Generals experimented with apparel—shirtwaists, skirts, hats, and shoes—to sell female soldiers as both feminine and military. And female recruits were sometimes given a choice of slimming down or getting discharged.
Not surprisingly, West Point men were even more important to public relations officers than WACs. The Academy, Linn writes, was celebrated for its conservative values and manly virtues.

The Army made extensive use of television to carry its message in shows like West Point Story, Go Set Go (a half-hour variety show), and The Big Picture, which opened with the launch of a Nike missile and a cannon firing an atomic shell, and closed with: “You can be an important part of the Big Picture, you can proudly serve with the best equipped, the best trained, the best fighting team in the world—the U.S. Army” (p. 263). Army officers, Linn reveals, lobbied against the Phil Silvers Show because it portrayed Sergeant Bilko as a con man and gambler who foiled Colonel Hall (and Army regulations) at every turn. But because it was popular with TV viewers, was a comedy, was independently produced, and did not require army equipment or stock footage, it was largely immune to criticism.

Despite all this activity, Linn writes, service leaders concluded in 1963 that a sizeable proportion of U.S. citizens believed that the army was “inflexible, resistant to change, imprisoned by traditions, wedded to past experiences, and a convenient dumping ground for the mediocre and worse” (p. 267). Thereafter they decided to stress the man over the machine and turn a potential negative—the perception of the Army as a tough, rugged life—into a plus.

Army leaders had hoped, Linn claims, that President Kennedy’s policy of flexible response—based on a conviction that reliance on airpower, massive retaliation, and inadequate ground forces invited aggression by the Soviet Union in Europe and the “Third World”—presaged an enhanced appreciation of their branch of military services. They emphasized their role across the spectrum of combat, from deterrence to counterinsurgency to large-unit ground forces and tank warfare. However, structural problems remained, including manpower shortages (especially in high-skilled jobs), low draftee morale, frequent turnover, and poorly prepared reservists. Basic Combat Training, the highly touted reform of the Kennedy administration, was a failure, Linn declares, alienating soldiers rather than building pride, teaching little of value, and providing scant information about each recruit’s potential. And so, in 1963, Colonel Robert Sullivan warned of “the haunting prospect” that “today’s generation of senior officers may leave to Americans, who outlive a future war, the historical legacy of the best managed, defeated army the world has ever known” (p. 92).

Colonel Sullivan may or may not have had Vietnam in mind. That traumatic, divisive, and unsuccessful war, which Linn does not discuss, changed everything. The armed forces were not well trained or adequately equipped to fight in an unconventional civil war. Between 1960 and 1965, Linn reports, the average unit had to replace more than half its personnel every thirteen months. In the 1970s, the draft ended and the United States opted for an all-
volunteer army. In the ensuing decades, the United States has engaged in a series of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have put hundreds of thousands of soldiers in harm’s way.

Today’s army is about the same size it was following post–World War II demobilization. Its supporters, Linn points out, deploy many of the claims their predecessors advanced more than a half-century ago. Setting forth a transformative agenda for 2025 in The Army Vision: Strategic Advantage in a Complex World (2015), they maintain that, while the Navy and Air Force have important roles to play, only “an agile, expert, innovative, interoperable, expeditionary, scalable, versatile and balanced force” filled with tactically and technically proficient soldiers who have mastered “interpersonal dynamics, organizational psychology, and negotiating to achieve desired outcomes with governments and indigenous populations,” can deter aggression, support our allies, and defeat our enemies on the ground (pp. 340–41). Illustrations for The Army Vision include a female paratrooper, a soldier high-fiving children, and two computer experts.

Paradoxically, perhaps, today’s volunteer army is more popular with the public than the citizen soldiers of the 1950s. Doing their jobs in hostile environments, the young men and women in uniform have, by and large, followed advice from Elvis Presley to “play it straight and do your best” (p. 341). And they have made it possible for the rest of us to go about our business, without making the sacrifices that have accompanied armed conflict.

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