

Lessons from the post-Vietnam military

In mid-September, I ran into retired General Barry McCaffrey in the green room at the NBC studios in Washington. He was discussing the latest turn in the don't-ask-don't-tell wars; I was providing commentary on Pope Benedict's visit to the U.K. In between our appearances (known in the trade as "hits"), McCaffrey asked me about my new work on John Paul II, "The End and the Beginning," and we discussed the late pope's role in the Long Lent of scandal in 2002, which I describe at length in the book. We then fell to talking about the reform of the U.S. military after the debacle of Vietnam, in which McCaffrey played a significant role. I mentioned that I had long had a hunch that there were lessons in that process of institutional self-renewal for the church, and he promised to send me a book on the subject, "Prodigal Soldiers" by James Kitfield.

Prodigal Soldiers confirmed my hunch that authentic Catholic reformers have a lot to learn from the men who turned a crumbling Army – riven by racial hatreds, beset by drug problems far greater than those of society at large, weak in discipline and even weaker in strategic understanding – into the high-tech, high-energy, no-nonsense force that is the U.S. Army today. The American military, in 2010, is arguably the best-functioning major institution in our country, despite the strains caused by two wars and a large number of smaller overseas deployments. How did this happen?

The Army was in terrible shape after Vietnam, and it was its younger officers – the captains and majors who had seen their men's lives wasted by stupid civilian strategists in Washington whom the brass declined to confront – who began to say, "Never again."

They refused to accept the ingrained American attitude that, while our typical lack of preparedness meant that we almost always lost the first battles of any war in which we finally engaged, we would inevitably bludgeon the enemy into surrender with a vast industrial mobilization. There wouldn't be time for this in future wars, the reformers believed; and in any event, it was an immoral waste of soldiers' lives

to use Napoleonic, massed army tactics rather than the maneuver warfare mastered by such great commanders as Alexander the Great and Robert E. Lee. Concurrently, the reformers jettisoned the hoary prejudices and ancient inter-service rivalries that had been another impediment in Vietnam, creating a new model of “joint operations” in which land, air and sea forces are thoroughly integrated in the command structure, with everyone therefore pulling on the same oar, in the same direction.

They insisted that the Army stop accepting social misfits in order to fulfill recruiting quotas. They were determined to rid the Army of racism, and took the educational and disciplinary measures necessary to do it. They worked vigorously to stamp out drug abuse, both by rehabilitation programs and by discharging those who couldn’t be helped. They convinced the authorities, both military and civilian, to make life something less than an ongoing, low-grade misery in barracks. They stressed educational opportunity for recruits, and they rebuilt the backbone of the Army, the career non-coms whose ranks had been particularly decimated by Vietnam.

Above all, they were self-critical, and learned to be even more thoughtfully self-critical in the revamped graduate programs they helped force into the military’s advanced command schools. They took risks in challenging superiors, and they challenged those of their peers who couldn’t cut it. They were prepared to resign rather than see out their careers in comfort, if the latter meant risking a repeat of the disaster through which they had lived as young officers.

There are important lessons here for seminary reform, for the relations between priests and bishops, and for relations among the bishops themselves. Catholic clerical culture today, especially at its higher altitudes, still exhibits some of the characteristics that helped turn what came to light in 2002 from sin and crime into scandal. The analogy to the post-Vietnam Army isn’t a perfect one, but there’s a lot for the church to learn from the hard path of self-renewal taken by the U.S. armed forces.

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