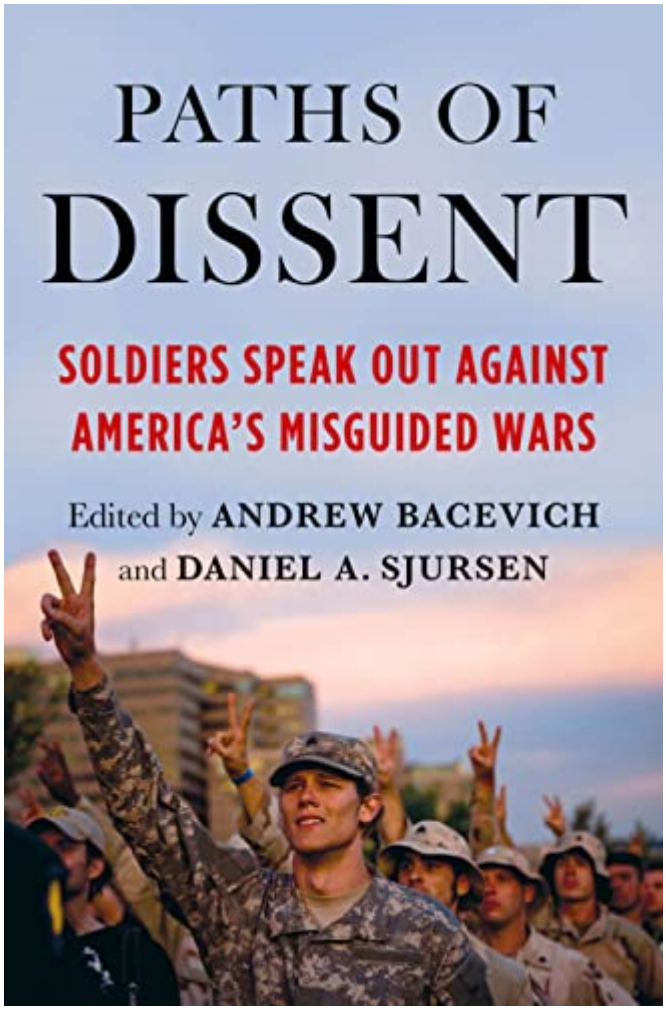
Peter Molin's Strike Through the Mask!: A Review of Andrew Bacevich's "Paths of Dissent"



What did you do if you were deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and believed the wars you volunteered to fight were unethical or badly managed? Keep quiet and perform your duties as best you could? Take your concerns to the chain-of-command? Express your reservations privately to friends and family? Protest publicly by writing a congressman or news outlet? Or, wait until you were out of service to tell the world about your misgivings?

In *Paths of Dissent: Soldiers Speak Out Against America's Misguided Wars* (2022), editors Andrew Bacevich and Daniel A.

Sjursen invite fourteen veterans of the Global War on Terror to describe acts of public protest they made while still serving or in the years afterward. The contributors describe the events that led them to protest and explore the consequences of their actions. They also reflect on the shape dissent has taken in the post-9/11 contemporary political and cultural climate.

Contributors include field-grade officers, junior officers, and enlisted service members; former non-commissioned officers are notably absent. Army and Marine voices dominate, with only Jonathan Hutto representing the Navy and no former Air Force or Coast Guard personnel featured. Hutto is the lone African-American voice, and Joy Damiani's the sole woman, while Buddhika Jayamaha's contribution illustrates the multi-cultural make-up of America's post-9/11 military. Arguably the most-well known contributors are National Football League star and Army Ranger Pat Tillman's brother Kevin and Army veteran-author Roy Scranton. In many cases, the contributors' acts-of-protest were letters written to influential decision-makers in Washington or opinion-pieces published in the *New York Times* or other high-brow journalistic outlets. Others were published in military venues such as the *Armed Forces Journal*, or in book form. Contributors often describe brief moments of mainstream news notoriety, but curiously, the Internet as an outlet for protest or as a possible galvanizer of public outrage is rarely mentioned. Only a few authors report actively participating in public protests or anti-war organizations.

The lack of a vibrant antiwar movement is foregrounded in Andrew Bacevich's introduction, as Bacevich, a retired colonel, came-of-age in the Vietnam era. That war's glaring sins and mistakes, as well as the ensuing public demonstrations, are on his mind: "In fact, from its very earliest stages until its mortifying conclusion, America's war in Vietnam was a crime." The implication, then, is that Iraq

and Afghanistan were also crimes, with the additional message being that we have ignorantly repeated Vietnam's mistakes. "…of this we can be certain," Bacevich writes, "rarely has such an excruciating experience yielded such a paltry harvest of learning."

The dismal historical record drives Bacevich to ask contemporary contributors to examine the disconnect between their isolated protests and popular tolerance of the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, marked as they were by torture, wanton killing, disrespect for our allies, helplessness in the face of Improvised Explosive Devices, unresolved debates about policy and strategy, and, most of all, lack of success. The personal narratives that follow Bacevich's introduction are varied and compelling.

For the field grade officers represented, such as Jason Dempsey, Paul Yingling, and Gian Gentile, speaking out against failed policies and tactics came not in the guise of impassioned outcries, but as reasoned analyses in books and thought-pieces aimed at military decision-makers. To a man, they report their ideas and objections fell on deaf ears. Gentile, an Army colonel who served in Baghdad at the height of the surge and subsequently took issue with COIN strategy and its primary proponent General David Petraeus, states it most bluntly: "From what I can tell, [my] seven years of professional military dissent had no impact on the actual US strategy and the conduct of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan." Instead, the failure to conform to repeat the party line brought upon their authors ostracization leading to early-retirement. No one's going to feel too sorry for colonels forced to live on a colonel's retirement pay-and-benefits, but taken together, the essays by this group of authors are savvy about military institutional politics and culture, particularly within the officer corps and especially in regard to its capacity for intellectual honesty and rigor.

The essays by junior officers typically begin by describing the youthful idealism that led the authors to the military, followed by accounts of how their idealism was crushed first in training (or in their educations at West Point or Annapolis), and culminating in scornful howls fomented by battlefield events in Iraq and Afghanistan. Army infantry officer Dan Bershinski describes how losing his legs to a mine in Afghanistan made him a pariah within the infantry corps. Rather than treated as a hero who might speak the truth of combat to officers in training, he was isolated from the junior officers whom he wanted to help become better leaders for fear his words and injuries might bum them out. For Marine Gil Barndollar, two desultory tours in Afghanistan drove home the point that the war was unwinnable, in equal parts due to failed American overarching strategy, the incompetence of the Afghan military, and his own units' risk-averse and uninspired tactics. For Marine Matthew P. Hoh, experiences in Iraq similar to Barndollar's in Afghanistan soured him. For these former officers, the gaping chasm between stated goals and ideals and actual experience of the war was intolerable. The sentiment expressed by Hoh that after leaving the military he vowed "to live a life according to how my mind, soul, and spirit dictate—to be intellectually and morally honest for the remainder of my days"—unites their accounts.

The contributions by junior enlisted service members are the most varied and in many ways the most interesting reflections in *Paths of Dissent*. Often, they recount dutiful performance of duty while in uniform, even by left-leaning and artistically-minded soldiers such as Joy Damiani and Roy Scranton. Airborne paratrooper Buddika Jayamaha reports with almost chagrin and regret an act-of-protest—an article he and squad members composed for the *New York Times*—he undertook while serving in the ranks while in Iraq. Frankly, the sense that the military was a reasonably tolerable institution for young men and women just starting out in life seems to predominate. Only Jonathan W. Hutto's essay describes a

sustained and contentious wrangle with his chain-of-command and the big Navy while in uniform born of miserable terms-of-service. For most of the enlisted authors in *Paths of Dissent*, the real drama takes place after leaving the military. Several accounts report flirtation with anti-war movements. A more common experience is a period of drift and dysfunction as they sorted out their past lives as soldiers with efforts to build meaningful lives afterward. Jayamaha writes, "I had too many choices, and every choice seemed hollow. I had survived the war relatively unscathed, thankful to my colleagues, leaders, and God for saving my dumb ass… But what would be the most meaningful way to spend the rest of my life? How could I be of service again?" Similarly, Roy Scranton writes that "…dissent may need to take form not in words but in deeds: not as yet another public performance of critique but as the solid accomplishment of repair."

The principled literary objections to small-unit practices or big-military policies recorded in *Paths of Dissent* differ from more overt forms of protest, such as refusal to obey orders or demonstration outside the halls of power. There are, however, other ways veterans manifested dissent than by writing letters, disobeying orders, and marching in the streets, which Bacevich and Sjursen seem not inclined to foreground. We might think of the low-boil burn virtually every deployed soldier felt about the wars. It was evident to almost everyone that that victory was far-off as the wars were being imagined and fought. As someone who has read dozens of Global War on Terror soldier memoirs and fictional portrayals, I'm surprised that the truculent dissatisfaction of lower-enlisted soldiers and junior officers surfaces in only a few *Paths of Dissent* accounts. Damiani's essay points to it, as does former-Marine's Vincent Emanuel's; general readers might know this spirit of unruly disobedience best from the sarcastic Terminal Lance cartoon strip.

We might also consider how the national conversations around

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and veteran suicides represented if not direct dissent, then touchstones by which the ill-begotten wars were often measured. In other words, the cries for help broadcast by troubled veterans might be understood as a dissent that had not found the right words for what those cries signified. Only Jonathan W. Hutto's contribution directly references racism as a rationale for dissent; Hutto's unfortunate experience illustrates how large could be the gap between the military's stated ideals and the reality of life in the ranks for people-of-color. Even in Joy Damiani's essay, which wonderfully documents what might be described as an early case of "quiet quitting" to silently register protest, gender inequity and sexual assault and abuse are not explored for the rottenness they all too often exposed at the core of military culture and the war effort. Finally, the idea that alienation generated by disgust with military hypocrisy and incompetence might lead to anti-establishment fervor for President Trump and radical conservative outrage is not considered in *Paths of Dissent*. What might Ashli Babbitt, the Air Force veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan who died storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021 have to say on the matter? Or active-duty Marine Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller, Jr., whose tirade against President Biden for his perceived mishandling of the evacuation of American allies at Hamid Karzai International Airport in August 2021 effectively ended his military career?

So, *Paths of Dissent* leans heavily toward mannered outcries-from-the-left against the American war machine, inspired by conscience, principle, and duty. I like that fine, but the mannered approach also hints at reasons why protest never caught hold with the populace as it did in the Vietnam era. Bacevich and many contributors view the tepid indifference of the American public as structurally facilitated by the all-volunteer military that allowed the populace to safely avoid thinking about the war. Considered from the populace's perspective, the Global War on Terrorism did not exact much of

a cost, and was hazily connected with the fact that there were no more major terrorist attacks on American soil. “Thank You for Your Service” and “Support the Troops” rhetoric was enough to demonstrate care and assuage guilty consciences about not personally doing more to fight “terrorism.” Left mostly unspoken was a less-flattering corollary in regard to veteran protest: “Well, what did you expect? You volunteered for it.” Even more: “You volunteered for it and were well-compensated for your service.” Vets themselves were subject to the force of these sentiments. It’s also hard not to think that a significant portion of the American public rationalized that there were plenty of Al Qaeda in Iraq and Taliban in Afghanistan who hated America and wanted to kill American soldiers. To continue to fight them—to not admit defeat—registered as legitimate, whatever the problems that accrued in the process.

Thus civilians, deferring to the military itself to shape and win the wars, did not demand accountability from political leaders, who in turn did not demand accountability from senior military leaders. In the absence of oversight, the military in the field floundered. Units did what they could, which often wasn’t much. Soldiers, murky about the big picture, understood missions in terms of tactical proficiency, loyalty to their squads, and body counts of dead Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Without clear orders and a winning strategy, soldiers made up their own minds and often took matters into their own hands. Some fought more brutally than policy and circumstance called for, while others turned in lackadaisical efforts that focused on staying safe and doing as little as possible.

While demanding that civilians and civilian leaders listen more carefully to the voices of soldiers, *Paths of Dissent* zeroes in on the military’s own culpability for creating the specific conditions that caused soldiers to dissent, as well as its inability to correct those conditions. An overarching message repeated often is that the military was and is

incapable of critiquing or reforming itself. The accounts by field grade officers illustrate that perpetuating the status quo is the imperative that most governs military culture, not winning wars or taking care of soldiers. Even relatively sustained efforts at internal change, such as the pivot to a counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, or application of manpower "surges" in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been poorly conceptualized and wracked by group-think and "flavor-of-the-day" thought-processes. A political sphere and populace that either refused to exercise oversight or just didn't care made the situation even worse. That the whole war enterprise might have been a disgraceful crime, as Bacevich suggests, tugged at the mind of all participants, thus adding layers of denial and self-deception. Given such inadequacy, is it any wonder that junior officers and junior enlisted felt unsupported and unheard?

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Paths of Dissent is dedicated to Ian Fishback, the Army special forces officer who took his grievances about the lack of guidance regarding the use of torture while interrogating prisoners in Iraq to the Washington political establishment and media mainstream in 2005. Bacevich reports that he asked Fishback to contribute, but Fishback was too overtaken by the madness that consumed him at the end of his life to author a publishable essay. Bacevich himself is no stranger to dissent; a retired Army colonel himself, he has written books whose titles illustrate his own objections to America's modern wars: *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (2005*), Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (2010), and *The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory* (2020). Co-editor Daniel A. Sjursen is not as well-known, but he's a retired Army officer who served

in Iraq and Afghanistan and is now associated with the website Antiwar.com.

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