A Paratrooper's Foresight: General James Gavin and the Health of the United States

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> First, we must be honest with ourselves, and clear thinking in our analysis of our failures and our successes.
>
> James M. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age*.[1]

> …the thinking of the younger generation of officers is critically contaminated by the veterans of past wars. Thus they frequently find themselves preparing feverishly to fight the last war better.
>
> – James M. Gavin[2]

On August 6, 1945, a date which marked the transformation of warfare around the globe, the first atomic bomb was dropped. Hovering above the Japanese city of Hiroshima, an American B-29 Superfortress droned. Its payload, a bomb with the fallacious moniker 'Little Boy' was prepared to be detonated over its target, the Aioi Bridge. The crew was only informed of the substance of their deadly cargo hours before it was to be dropped. The word 'atomic' crackled through the headsets, the first bomb of its kind. The crew of the *Enola Gay* recorded their experience of Little Boy's destructiveness. Author Peter Wyden writes in *Day One: Before Hiroshima and After* what was seen by the crew, "A column of smoke is rising fast. It has a fiery red core … Fires are springing up everywhere… there are too many to count… Here it comes, the mushroom shape..."[3] With this detonation of the world's first atomic bomb, warfare within the parameters of the Second World War, both strategic and tactical were superseded. But the reliance on ever bigger bombs would lead the world to the brink of mutually assured destruction (MAD), a concept which only brought about a false sense of security.[4]

Due to the development of the atomic bomb, warfare in the twentieth century changed greatly, a fact that required the rethinking of strategy and tactics. The "bomb" was thought to be the ultimate weapon that could not be matched; however, the United States' monopoly on the "bomb" quickly disappeared as the Soviet Union had developed a bomb of their own only four years later. Time has forgotten a lone voice during the Cold War, General James Maurice Gavin, well known for his airborne exploits with the 82nd Airborne Division in the Second World War, but little has been written on his post-war writings. The health of the United States was at the center of Gen. James Gavin's thinking. His writings in the post-war years: *Airborne Warfare* (1947), *War and Peace in the Space Age* (1958) and *Crisis Now: Crisis in the Cities, Crisis in Vietnam, A Commitment to Change* (1968) exemplify his passion to lead America into the future on and off the battlefield. His thinking was not muddled in fighting the Second World War over again but on grasping the threat which was posed against the nation and harnessing technological skills which would propel the United States into a secure twenty-first century. The "bomb" did not provide the answer and only brought about a more frustrating form of limited warfare. The dispersement of forces was at the center of Gen. Gavin's thinking. Fast moving, mobile airborne forces were required. Military thought was not to be caught up in fighting the past war but instead on looking forward to how the next would be fought. Gen. Gavin continually expounded upon these facts, arguing that tomorrow's fight would be different than yesterday's victories or defeats.

The Second World War brought some of the best leaders to the top of the American leadership pool. General James Gavin was one of these men. "Jumpin' Jim" Gavin, as known by his men, led from the front with his M1 Garand rifle in hand. As the German Blitzkrieg cut through Europe, American military personnel read that

impregnable fortresses such as that of Eben-Emael in Belgium were captured with little to no resistance. Eben-Emael was captured not by a moving ground envelopment but by a new form of attack; vertical envelopment by airborne forces. The United States lacked a cohesive airborne force. Captain Gavin (at the time) had a hand in the creation of America's airborne forces. "Gavin was soon pulled from C Company to airborne headquarters by Colonel Bill Lee [father of the American airborne], who put the talented young officer to work writing one of the first doctrinal manuals for this new form of warfare, *The Employment of Airborne Forces*," writes Ed Ruggero in *Combat Jump: The Young Men Who Led the Assault into Fortress Europe, July 1943*. Ruggero also wrote that, "…The officers in the Provisional Parachute Group put in long hours, working out the details of how such an organization should be equipped and how it should fight."[5] However, Gen. Gavin would not sit on the sidelines as he sought a place on the battlefield to put into practice the tactics he helped fashion. He would get his chance leading the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division into Sicily known as Operation Husky in July 1943.[6] Colonel Gavin sent a written letter out to the regiment before the commencement of the jump into Sicily, of which the final paragraph reads, "The term 'American parachutist' has become synonymous with courage of high order. Let us carry the fight to the enemy and make the American Parachutist feared and respected through all his ranks. Attack violently. Destroy him wherever found. I know you will do your job."[7]

The drop on Sicily during Operation Husky was far from a success. Paratroopers of the 505th were scattered throughout the countryside, forming small groups that fought toward their objectives. The town of Gela, Sicily was the objective for Col. Gavin and his men but as he traversed Biazzo Ridge along the Acate River to the

east of Gela he quickly realized the predicament that the Forty-fifth Division and the First Division faced as they landed on the beaches of Sicily. "A German force on the ridge could launch an attack against the flank of the Forty-fifth Division… the ridge would give them a commanding piece of terrain right in between two American positions…" writes Ruggero. The Herman Goering Panzer Division stood poised to take possession of this position. The fight on Biazzo Ridge pitted stubborn light infantry soldiers against a heavily armored crack German division. Ruggero continues, "Gavin… saw the ridge for what it was – a key piece of terrain in the unfolding battle, perhaps even critical for the whole invasion."[8] The ridge, if left unsecure, would have allowed the German panzers to isolate one division and destroy the other. The lightly armed paratroopers could do little against the armor of German tanks. Col. Gavin quickly brought mortars and howitzers into the battle to provide the needed respite against the German artillery and armor. Both sides grew exhausted by the intense fighting with the Germans gaining little. "Gavin knew that somewhere down past the vineyard, the German commander was probably reorganizing and coiling for a renewed attack on the ridge… Now was the time for the paratroopers to attack… Gavin was about to ask more of them," opines Ruggero.[9] Before the Germans could advance on the weary paratroopers, Col. Gavin pushed forward first. With the help of the Forty-fifth Division, the 505th PIR was able to push the veteran Herman Goering Division off Biazzo Ridge. Col. Gavin's resourcefulness helped prevent the outflanking of American infantry divisions that were landing on the beaches of Sicily. With the same insightfulness Gen. Gavin saw that the future of the United States rested on the shoulders of those who could plan for the future battlefield. For Gen. Gavin, the pen became mightier than the sword.

Gen. Gavin wanted his readers to clearly realize that America's

isolated position within the world was diminished by the technology that existed during the Cold War. The technological leap that occurred in the twentieth century changed the way in which warfare could and would be fought. Gen. Gavin starkly wrote within his chapter "The Decade of Decision: 1955-1965" in *War and Peace in the Space Age*, "Now with the greater ranges and unprecedented fire power of nuclear weapons and the hyper-mobility of missiles and supersonic air vehicles, the area of the tactical battle has increased beyond anything even dreamed of in the past."[10] A war on the global scale in the technological age would encompass the whole world like the preceding wars had not. Missiles could provide the means of delivering nuclear weapons from one continent to another with ease. The jet engine provided the means of transporting men and materials faster and farther than that of the Second World War. Gen. Gavin provided an enlightening look at mobility, as in the nineteenth century it equated to roughly 6mph, World War Two 300mph and future 'Earth War'… 600mph.[11] The speed of movement had, and currently has, the potential to bring warfare to any part of the world in a matter of moments. The defense of the United States therefore concerned parts of the world that were never considered vital until after the Second World War. Author Kashid Khalidi writes in *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*, "President Harry S. Truman's address of March 12, 1947… constituted the first time an American president had designated the Middle East as an area that was crucial to the national security interests of the United States."[12] Massive nuclear weapons were thought to be the perfect weapon that would solve the problem of the "Earth War" acting as a deterrent to foreign aggression, but at what cost?

As previously mentioned, America's monopoly on a nuclear arsenal was short lived. "For a time the atomic monopoly had offered

us something of a bargain-basement defense policy," writes author David Halberstam in *The Fifties*.[13] As the 'Iron Curtain' descended over Europe, American supremacy on the battlefield was secure, for a short time, with the new wonder-weapon. However, with this weapon came many concessions that were not forward looking and were only stifling to America's new place as a world power. The swift demobilization of American forces in the post-war years of the mid 1940s and the slashing of the defense budget was not realistic in its foresight, especially with the continual threat of Soviet aggression. On September 3, 1949, American singular ownership of nuclear power was canceled.[14] The Soviet Union and the United States both harnessed the power of the atom. The struggle for supremacy and the threat of an all out holocaust of mankind was just beginning.

The threat of nuclear holocaust was, and is, still real. Gen. Gavin sought to set a sensible definition for warfare in the nuclear age and for the future as well. Warfare would not adhere to a flexible pendulum that would swing between war and peace during this period. Warfare would be constant. "I believe that by now most thoughtful people recognize as obsolete for our time this [Karl von Clausewitz's dictum of defined war and peace] simplistic view of peace and war as two distinct times in a nation's life. There is economic war, cold war, espionage, guerilla war, limited war, the war of ideas, etc.," opine the authors of *Crisis Now: Crisis in the Cities, Crisis in Vietnam, A Commitment to Change*, James Gavin and Arthur Hadley.[15] The nuclear bomb provided the mode to which a society could be rendered extinct within a short amount of time. Wars that may be limited in their means had the potential to escalate to full scale confrontations with other nuclear powers across the globe. The wholesale killing of large parts of humanity were not acceptable. Though the world had its "ultimate" weapon wars still would con-

tinue in limited form.

Gen. Gavin quickly grasped that the atomic bomb was not an "ultimate" weapon. He did not take the side of either those who advocated the 'complete' use of the bomb in the context of 'annihilation,' nor did he side with the anti-bomb protestors.[16] He was sensible with the new form of weapon which man now possessed and its inherent destructiveness. Man has prevailed over many technological innovations throughout the history of warfare from heavy cavalry to the invention of the machine gun and that of the strategic bomber. Nuclear weapons were no different. Authors T. Michael Booth and Duncan Spencer wrote in *Paratrooper: The Life of Gen. James M. Gavin*, "Gavin's reaction to the atom bomb was not to be swept away by it, but to face it through 'dispersion'… 'Never again may troops concentrate as they have in the past. For example, a buildup similar to that for the Normandy assault would suffer a most disastrous scorching if caught under an atomic bombing or missile attack… a defending force opposing such an attempt… would have to remain continuously dispersed."[17] Limited warfare proved to be the 'dispersed' means by which mankind could avoid nuclear holocaust.

Limited warfare set the tone of the nuclear age and the future. Escalation into a general war would engender the use of nuclear means to decide a conflict. Many leaders within the Pentagon were certain of this point and also advocated it. But others, such as Gen. Gavin, sought to keep warfare within limited constraints. In a second meeting for the *Council on Foreign Relations* entitled "Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy" on February 15, 1956 Gen. Gavin defined the use of limited warfare and a more mobile Army:

> General Gavin reported that experimental Army divisions such as the 101st are stressing hyper-mobility. The organizing priority is (1) air mobility, and (2)

> sustained combat capability… After the break for dinner, General Gavin launched into a discussion of types of limited war. He suggested that wars are limited either in the amount of force brought to bear, by the percentage of a country's GNP devoted to pursuit of the war, or in terms of the geography of the area of combat. The greatest guarantee of expansion of a war is provided by the limits of geography… In terms of trying to limit a war the European scene presents the most problems, while isolated area like Indo China presents the fewest. An area like the Middle East, which is a perennial trouble spot, falls somewhere in between these two extremes, The Middle East, which is the land bridge to Eurasia and Africa presents a changing picture depending upon the time in the future that trouble might break out, for all the forces in that area are in a state of evolution.[18]

Limited wars allowed for a cost effective way of fighting a war, while at the same time avoiding an all out nuclear conflict. Gen. Gavin's understanding of dispersion was soundly joined with limited warfare.

Gen. Gavin insisted that the United States must stay focused on continually adapting forces to the future battlefield, insisting that America could not get caught fighting the wars of the past. "Organizations created to fight the last war better are not going to win the next," Gen. Gavin writes in *Airborne Warfare*, "Keeping foremost in our minds the functional purposes of our means of ground combat, these means must be developed and produced so that they can be delivered to the battlefield in sufficient quantity to gain the decision."[19] Throughout his writings, Gen. Gavin hammered away at the point of 'not fighting the past wars better' but developing and creating means to fight for the future. Therefore, it was inevitable that space was to be the next place of innovation for

the United States.

The "space age" had come upon the world with the innovation of rocketry and its implementation within the Second World War. Rocketry had a farther reach than what man had first thought within the realm of science and warfare. His advocacy of innovations within differing space platforms helped propel American boundaries into space. "[Wernher] Von Braun excited Gavin with farsighted military ideas such as an artificial earth satellite and rockets that could reach the moon," writes T. Michael Booth and Duncan Spencer the authors of *Paratrooper: The Life of Gen. James M. Gavin*, "Gavin concluded that the army should back a missile that could both loft a satellite and give the army an awesome striking range of 1,000 to 1,500 miles… Gavin sold the idea to Ridgeway."[20] He was driven by the intelligence that the United States lagged behind the Soviets and if we should fall far behind them America could potentially lose a war that did not see a single shot fired. "And while our strength is ebbing [within the parameters of technological advancement] our obligations are increasing," writes Gen. Gavin.[21] With the innovation of satellites, guided missiles and the exploration of space the earth's breadth was shrunk. Our defense hinged upon our ability to interact with space before others gained supremacy over it. In a letter to then Senator John F. Kennedy, dated February 16, 1959 Gen. Gavin writes:

> I really think that it is very important that we realize that we must consider our efforts as one of the "Western World" and that we seek to integrate and bring together our best scientific and industrial thinking. At present time we are compartmented in many respects, both by country and by service within the armed forces of the many nations associated with us. On the other hand, the Soviets are integrated across the board thus, once a decision is made,

> with significantly greater economy of resources, they can achieve far more. In the long run, we will only survive in this contest when through an integrated far-seeing effort we can regain the initiative and cause the Soviets to watch and follow us as a clue to the technical future in weapons systems. This is possible, but will take a greater effort, and a more integrated effort, than we are now making. At the rate things are now going, it does not take much vision to see that the decisions that will determine our future as an independent people will be made through the use and control of space. In the records, so far, the Soviets have demonstrated their superior leadership, both technical leadership and psychological leadership, in their exploitation of what they have accomplished.[22]

Space was central in his thinking of American defense and the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) countries. As can be seen throughout history the complexities of warfare expanded exponentially with the advancement of technology.

With warfare involving the swathe of the whole earth Gen. Gavin did not shy away from the complexities of warfare. The technological resources that influenced warfare were much more complex than those of the past. Gen. Gavin alluded to multiple technologies that were being developed in the 1950s and 1960s; intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), satellites, aerial drones, and computers were just a few examples of the complex platforms that were being created during Gen. Gavin's tenure in the military. He insisted that military tacticians will have severely complex problems that will need to be thoroughly researched and understood because of the growth of technology.[23]

Even today the public continues to misunderstand warfare and the implications that technology has had on it. Warfare has changed as the public's perception of warfare harkens back to the Second

World War. Gen. Gavin was far ahead of his time in understanding that warfare had transitioned. In *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* author General Rupert Smith wrote in 2007, "Nonetheless, war as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such war no longer exist."[24] Gen. Gavin understood that a misunderstanding of warfare could potentially have an adverse effect on the decisions of politicians and those that vote them into office. He wrote in 1958, "The economic, psychological and technical factors all weigh more heavily on the outcome of combat between nations than applied physical force itself."[25] The public's view of warfare is on the physical, rather than the other three applied factors which General Gavin speaks of and which General Smith highlights decades later.

For a strong defense of the nation to occur the nation within must be healthy. Gen. Gavin, an orphan in his youth, comprehended that the United States could not fulfill its exploration of space, innovations in technology, growth in education, advances in medicine and defense, all while trying to stay ahead of the Soviet Union without a healthy societal structure. Peter B. Levy quotes in *The Civil Rights Movement* from a "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968)," "Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice. They strike at the freedom of every citizen. The community cannot – it will not – tolerate coercion and mob rule. Violence and destruction must be ended – in the streets of the ghetto and in the lives of people. Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans."[26] With the race and anti-war riots occurring throughout the United States in major city centers, the country looked as though it was crumbling under the weight of the Cold War.[27]

The aging paratrooper foresaw the need for the revitalization of American cities being paramount in the protection of the nation, as one cannot protect from the outside while the inside is slowly deteriorating. "Unless we realize the size and nature of our problem, any answers we give will be too little and too late – and indeed quite irrelevant," writes Gen. Gavin in *Crisis Now* in 1968, "Violence will increase and the overall breakdown of our national life will follow as a scientific certainty."[28] America was in the throngs of a societal shift as minorities within American ghettos and urban environments sought recognition which was long due to them. The anti-war movement was winning over more of the population. In his conclusion for the chapter "The Human Environment – The City," he writes, "I want to abolish 'we' and 'they.' To have both white and black become 'we.' The 'we' of *e pluribus unum* (from the many, one). I wish to establish that unity we dreamed of when we wrote: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal…"[29] The health of the nation rested on that 'all men are created equal.' If our nation did not adhere to this truth then the defense of the country from outside aggressors would have been stunted, a point that Gen. Gavin saw as central to the defense of our nation.

In conclusion, the foresight of General James Gavin provided the nation with a sound basis for defense for the future based on his insight that warfare had changed as soon as the atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan was detonated. The singular dependence on an atomic arsenal lasted for a short time until the Soviet Union created their own arsenal of deadly atomic weapons. The future looked bleak as 'mutually assured destruction' was on the lips of many in the United States and around the world. Gen. Gavin illustrated that warfare on a global scale could with ease touch every continent like never before seen in warfare of the past. The usage of a single nuclear weapon would only spell disaster for a large concentration of

soldiers. Dispersion and mobility were required by Gen. Gavin to respond to the physical battlefield. Limited wars were considered the only means to keep the world from spiraling into a nuclear war, where there would be no winners. In this technological age the defense of the nation depended on our ability to look forward and see the battlefield of the future and most definitely not preparing to fight the last one better. With the space age coming to fruition in the 1950s and 1960s a new avenue of defense was seen in the heavens. The earth below could only be secure if the skies above were. Gen. Gavin saw this as a vital avenue for research. Rocketry would not only provide the means to secure Earth but also space. During this period it was evident that warfare was becoming very complex with the myriad of technology, mobility, highly volatile nuclear weapons and limited wars sprouting up throughout the world. Gen. Gavin understood explicitly that the public needed to understand that warfare had transitioned and physical engagement on the battlefield would intertwine with economic, psychological and technical factors, in many ways surmounting physical engagements. The whole of this defense rested on the health of the nation from within. The civil rights and anti-war movements stressed the foundation of the country. Gen. Gavin clearly asserted that no technological weapon or defense could protect the nation that was falling apart from the inside. Gen. Gavin's honest assessments of America's failures and successes helped propel it into the twenty-first century.

Notes

[1] James M. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 288.

[2] Ibid., 269.

[3] Peter Wyden, *Day One: Before Hiroshima and After* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 247.

[4] Ibid., 235-247.

[5] Ed Ruggero, *Combat Jump: The Young Men Who Led the Assault into Fortress Europe, July 1943* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 28-29.

[6] Ibid., 1.

[7] Ibid., 126.

[8] Ibid., 283.

[9] Ibid., 317.

[10] Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, 216-217.

[11] Ibid., 216-218.

[12] Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 40-41.

[13] David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 27.

[14] Ibid., 25.

[15] James M. Gavin and Arthur T. Hadley, *Crisis Now: Crisis in the Cities, Crisis in Vietnam, A Commitment to Change* 2nd Printing (New York: Random House, Inc., 1968), 25.

[16] T. Michael Booth and Duncan Spencer, *Paratrooper: The Life of Gen. James M. Gavin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 326.

[17] Ibid., 326-327.

[18] The James M. Gavin Papers, Box 20, The U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

[19] James M. Gavin, *Airborne Warfare* (Washington D.C.: Infantry Journal, 1947), 175.

[20] Booth and Spencer, 367.

[21] Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, 13.

[22] The James M. Gavin Papers, Box 26, the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

[23] Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, 226.

[24] Rupert Smith (General), *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 3.

[25] Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, 232.

[26] Peter B. Levy, *The Civil Rights Movements* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998), 194.

[27] Ibid., 3-35.

[28] Gavin, *Crisis Now*, 99.

[29] Ibid., 142.

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