

DOES THE ARMY HAVE A FUTURE? DETERRENCE AND CIVIL—MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE POST—VIETNAM ERA

by

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In the October 1973 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Louis Halle concluded that war between great powers had lost its former legitimacy and therefore did not have a future.¹ If Halle is correct, sizeable numbers of our citizenry may legitimately ask whether the Army has a future; that is, to question the justification for expensive large-standing conventional ground forces during an era of competition for resources, nuclear deterrence, and post-Vietnam aversion to US participation in limited wars. This mood, coupled with a trend toward a more ingrown and socially isolated Army, could result in civil-military tensions that would serve neither the nation nor the Army's interests. This essay addresses the major sources of these potential tensions and offers some solutions to ameliorate them.

TECHNOLOGY, DETERRENCE, AND THE VIETNAM LEGACY

The core of Halle's argument is that advances in technology have resulted in the constantly increasing destructiveness of warfare until, in the contemporary era, it has effectively ruled out the deliberate resort to war by a nuclear power against another state capable of nuclear retaliation. Furthermore, the deliberate resort to major nonnuclear warfare and even limited warfare between such powers is highly unlikely because of the

chances of escalation to nuclear war.² Regardless of complex calculations by strategic planners that might show relative "advantages" in simulated strategic warfare, sane political authorities—as McGeorge Bundy reminds us—simply would not consciously choose to start a nuclear war:

In the world of real political leaders—whether here or in the Soviet Union—a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one's own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on one hundred cities are unthinkable.³

And if technology has made nuclear war unthinkable to political leaders, it has also had an impact on the individual soldiers who must inhabit the modern battlefield. John Keegan analyzes the behavior of man in war in his excellent book, *The Face of Battle*, in which he concludes that "Impersonality, coercion, deliberate cruelty, all deployed on a rising scale, make the fitness of modern man to sustain the stress of battle increasingly difficult." Because "The usefulness of future battle is widely doubted," the young are "increasingly unwilling to serve as conscripts in armies they see as ornamental." Thus, "The suspicion grows that battle has already abolished itself."⁴

What has been suggested is that the destructiveness of military technology and internal sociopolitical tensions of an advanced industrial society have resulted in the declining legitimacy of military force. Total war is no longer seen as an instrument for achieving national goals, and as Morris Janowitz notes, "A military force based on conventional mobilization for total war gives way to a force in being, which is designed to achieve deterrence."⁵

Deterrence as a *raison d'être* for military forces is not without its own tensions. As early as 1945, Bernard Brodie stated that the only useful purpose of the military was to prevent wars.⁶ However, Jacques van Doorn, in *The Soldier and Social Change*, points out that both nuclear weapons and the concept of strategic deterrence "undermine the traditional view of the task of the military" because the idea of war's inevitability is weakened. The maintenance of deterrence is passive in nature and difficult for the military, which requires a more positive outlook: "The more unlikely major military conflicts become, the more difficult it is for the military [man], not to mention his environment, to retain belief in his efforts and existence."⁷

Perhaps more explicit and relevant to our own experience is Morris Janowitz' description of the deterrent dilemma as "whether a force effectively committed to a deterrent philosophy and to peacekeeping and the concept of military presence can maintain its essential combat readiness."⁸ Affected more than any other service by this dilemma is the Army, for it is in the ground forces where the difference between peacetime training and actual combat is the greatest. Since a period of prolonged peace is quite likely, maintaining combat readiness may be difficult and dissatisfying for officers without sufficient operational experience. The uncertainties produced by this situation could result in inflexibility governing adjustment to the deterrent philosophy, and possibly:

[the] acceptance of doctrines which distort the utility of military force in international relations . . . which are excessively ideological, absolutist, and assault-oriented.⁹

Added to the uncertainties of a deterrent philosophy for American military forces are those resulting from the Vietnam conflict. While an in-depth analysis of the "lessons learned" from Vietnam is beyond the scope of this paper, any assessment of future civil-military relations must take into account some of the important legacies of the most divisive conflict in our country's history since the Civil War.

A few of the more important themes, then, would include: an activist Congress for which claims of national security no longer go unchallenged; a greater realization that successful foreign policy cannot be sustained without public support and understanding; budgetary stringency in defense matters and more concern directed toward welfare-related goals; a feeling that the voting public will no longer tolerate long, costly conflicts or a large peacetime force structure that appears to have limited utility; a lowering of the military's prestige with society which, while having improved in recent years, still leaves a residue of anti-military feeling and skepticism concerning the profession of arms that is likely to persist for some time; a greater realization of the costs of attempting to control the destiny of a Third World country against the cross-currents of nationalism, and its corollary, the increasing intractability of the world to US intervention; and the end of the draft, which may be the most important consequence of all for the Army.¹⁰ Secretary of Defense Harold Brown perhaps best summed it up when he stated recently that he learned both "the limitations of military force in a politically ambiguous, highly circumscribed situation," and "that we should be very cautious in expanding our foreign-policy commitments beyond our vital security interests."¹¹

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD MILITARY FORCE

How, then, have the increasing destructiveness of military technology, the concept of strategic deterrence, and the legacy of Vietnam affected the American public's attitudes toward the use of military force? Bruce Russett and Miroslav Nincic, using public opinion survey data gathered at various points over nearly 40 years, concluded in 1976 that Americans were "much less favorably disposed toward use of military force abroad than at any time since the beginning of the Cold War." They further concluded that public willingness to provide even military supplies in defense of other nations is highly selective.¹² Such an attitude undoubtedly reflects not only the notion of many people that nothing short of direct attack on the US justifies the risk of nuclear warfare, but also that the Vietnam experience demands a reassessment of the costs and advantages of military force in the Third World.¹³

Related to this reluctance to use force abroad is a diminished sense in the public's political consciousness of an external threat such as that which prevailed during the height of the cold war.¹⁴ A recent *Time* poll, for example, that asked Americans what they thought were the main issues facing the country, showed worries like inflation, jobs, energy, and taxes at the top of the list, and concern about the Soviet Union in last place with only one percent of those polled mentioning it.¹⁵ Only seven percent of those polled by Gallup in October 1977 mentioned foreign policy as a major national problem.¹⁶ A series of studies conducted by Potomac Associates from 1964 to 1976 depicted a clear long-term trend toward dominance of domestic over international issues, but also showed an increase in public concern over foreign policy and defense matters from 1974 to 1976.¹⁷ Certainly the Soviet Union's continuing conventional and strategic military buildup and recent activity in Africa are disquieting to many Americans. In the absence of a clearly perceived threat to national security, however, it seems probable

that the US public will continue to be less concerned about external dangers now than in the cold war years.

One of the consequences of ending the draft is that in the years ahead, fewer leaders and opinion-molders in Congress, industry, business, government, and the universities will have had military experience. Representative Bob Wilson, a House member since 1951 and senior Republican on its Armed Services Committee, recently noted that congressional concern for military people and national defense is dwindling and will get worse with every election because of this factor.¹⁸

Even older, stalwart congressional defenders of the military are questioning the slowly rising defense budget, as did Representative George Mahon, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, when he sharply questioned then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George Brown, about the \$330.7 billion for national defense appropriated during the past three years: "My colleagues keep asking, 'How do you let them get away with so much waste?' The average American would feel that \$330 billion not only would enable us to avoid disaster but to keep pace with the Soviet Union." Another member of the committee,

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Representative Joseph Addabbo, warned General Brown that "We could spend ourselves into oblivion" by using the nation's resources to combat an outside threat and thus destroy the country from within.¹⁹ The legitimate concerns expressed in this line of questioning, together with the trend toward fewer members of Congress with military service and the changing public attitudes toward the use of military force, portend that defense policies will come under increasingly sharp scrutiny in future years.

THE NEED TO ESTABLISH A NEED

From what has been said, we may assume that large numbers of the American body politic will justifiably feel that modern war, as one writer has succinctly stated, "may have left in it the same lack of utility as the appendix has in the human body."²⁰ And while the mass of our citizenry will probably continue to support policies essential for nuclear deterrence—with continued debate, no doubt, on alternative strategies and budget levels—it may be much more difficult to defend against retrenchment of general purpose forces, since, as Maxwell Taylor is reputed to have once said, "A peacetime Army is like a chimney in summer." Thus, if it is in the nation's interests—not just the Army's interests—to maintain a sizeable peacetime Army, then the rationale for such a force will have to be convincingly articulated.

Rather than use hard-sell "scare tactics" and outdated, unrealistic scenarios for such a rationale, we would probably be more credible if we admitted that the need for a nonnuclear establishment is based not only on its role in deterrence, but also on uncertainty: uncertainty about the unlikely and the unpredictable, about what may happen in the world, and how we may be called upon to use military force, even though that possibility may appear quite unlikely at present;²¹ uncertainty about terrorist activities that may encumber world peace; about nuclear multipolarity and its unpredictable consequences; about access to critical natural resources and maritime

routes; about the possible volatility of USSR and PRC leadership and the future relations of these two Communist states with each other; about a continuing Soviet military buildup and the possibility that their forces would become more active instruments of power; and about the sudden development of a power vacuum in a volatile area in which a local crisis could escalate and conceivably embroil forces of the superpowers.²²

None of these uncertainties may actually occur, of course—at least not to the extent that the use of the US Army is required—but, as Laurence Martin has observed, although it is more difficult for the armed forces to explain their role, "Not the least difficult or important task of Western governments is . . . that of preserving in times of complacency the capabilities to which the public will turn for reassurance at moments of crises."²³

In a recent article, Klaus Knorr reappraises the thesis advanced in an earlier book that the usability and usefulness of military force in relations between states had diminished. For a number of reasons—economic motives that might fuel military conflicts in the future; the fact that nonnuclear states are apparently less restrained in their behavior toward nuclear nations; lessened sensitivity to war's destructiveness by Communist societies and the lesser developed countries; and unknowns concerning whether the balance of deterrent power on both the conventional and strategic levels will remain stable—Knorr concludes: "Unhappily and disappointingly, . . . the global picture is far from clear so far as the utility of military force is concerned." He expects international conflict and foreign interventions in civil wars to continue, with diminishing superpower military influence in the Third World, but he also expects that conflicts in these areas will more likely remain localized if deterrence between the US and the Soviet Union remains stable. And, if the US still adheres to world order objectives that include the security of West Europe, Japan, and Israel, then this recommends

“having military options and . . . the will, even if more restrained than two decades ago, to consider their use.”²⁴

Another valid justification for the maintenance of sufficient conventional forces is their utility as a condition of self-confidence in negotiations with the East.²⁵ For as Stanley Hoffman has noted:

If the deterrence of war is the supreme imperative, and the revulsion against force leaves only diplomacy as the means to that end, the price to be paid for peace and military security could be Soviet preponderance and political insecurity.²⁶

Finally, the great power image and the evidence of the nation's willingness to play an important role in world affairs are supplied by the existence of large peacetime conventional forces. Perceptions are extremely important in the international arena, and in this sense the main purposes of the military are political or psychological.²⁷ Certainly it can be argued that the image of Soviet political power, in the eyes of its leadership elites and those of other nations, is closely related to the existence of considerable Soviet military strength. Indeed, as other elements of Soviet national power continue to lag behind those of the US, even more reliance may be placed on this pillar by the Soviets.²⁸ Thus, as even that staunch critic of defense, the Brookings Institution, stated in its *Setting National Priorities: The Next Ten Years*:

[The outlook] may be disheartening to some Americans, but the alternative is worse. Military power continues to play an important part in world affairs. The nation can only protect itself and its interests abroad if it is willing to spend what is necessary to maintain a credible military posture.²⁹

THE TREND TOWARD INSULARITY

If it is important for the American public to have a better understanding of the Army's

role in the future, it is also vital that our officers, particularly, be able to articulate that role to them in a rational, balanced manner. To do so requires an officer corps that is politically sensitized as to its role in American society. We must realize that today there is a sharp contrast between the dominant social values and the ethos of combat and heroism—and the cleavage may become greater in the future if we are not alert to it.³⁰

We must realize that many civilians are suspicious of the “military theology,” as Lewis Lapham describes it: “the cloistered nature of Army life and the habit of mind that makes of war a virtuous crusade.”³¹ And we must also realize that many civilians resent the “gravity and moral tone” with which we tend to discuss our responsibilities for national security.³² Wisely, General Maxwell Taylor advised us nearly 10 years ago to combat this legitimate societal concern by demonstrating in our behavior that “we do not think exclusively in terms of force in solving the world's problems, that we can and do act not just from the military interest but from the national interest.”³³

Therefore, our officer corps must understand that effective civilian control should rest on mutual understanding, and particularly on its assimilation of civilian perspectives, which in our society must necessarily be the determining ones.³⁴ To do this, we need a broad-gauged officer corps which realizes that the most challenging task of our profession is insuring “sensitivity and responsiveness to societal change, while retaining values essential to combat.”³⁵

Unfortunately, at the very time that our Army should be reaching out for better understanding and social integration, there are signs that instead it may be turning inward.³⁶ Part of this insularity results from a smaller, all-volunteer force which relies to a large extent on recruitment of young men from low-education, disadvantaged backgrounds: a force whose enlisted structure is therefore less representative of a society increasingly dominated by the middle classes.³⁷

Another factor is a trend in the Army's officer service school system at almost all levels toward greater concentration on the technical skills associated with proficiency for combat, with less emphasis on education to broaden the perspectives of our officers throughout their careers. Even at the postgraduate level these pressures are being felt. Influential senior leaders have professed a desire to see the Army War College reorient its curriculum toward greater emphasis on large unit operations. The potential danger in this trend toward technocracy is an increasingly narrow focus, lack of perspective, and ideological rigidity that could lead to an even more conservative outlook, resulting in an ingrown and socially isolated Army.³⁸

To arrest this trend toward insularity, a number of steps can be taken. The most important is to reappraise the goals of our military school system to insure that the core curricula retain a balance, that is, some education designed to broaden the base of our officers. One way to assist in accomplishing this would be to establish a concentrated and progressive program for the teaching of military history across the entire school system. This should be military history in its broadest sense, including the relationship between armed forces and society, rather than purely operational, administrative, or technical in scope.³⁹ In particular, care must be exercised to retain a balanced academic program at the Army War College, with continued exposure of students to the national and international environment, and the opportunity to analyze the larger issues affecting the Army. The goal should be to produce perceptive senior leaders, not simply narrow military technocrats.

Other measures that might be taken could include: increasing the number of officers and Foreign Service officers in the State Department/DOD Exchange Program, and possibly broadening this concept to other major governmental departments; enlarging the White House Fellowship Program to specifically encompass a larger number of military officers; assigning high quality

officers, with the requisite academic credentials, to college ROTC duty, with increased emphasis placed on their interaction with the academic and civilian community; sending more officers to civilian graduate schooling, consistent with mission requirements; and devoting greater attention to officer participation in civic affairs and public speaking to civilian audiences. If these measures were diligently pursued, they would not only broaden the perspectives of our officer corps, but they would also have the salutary effect of enhancing mutual civil-military understanding.

In summary, technology, strategic deterrence, the legacies of Vietnam, and changing attitudes toward the use of military force have combined in the minds of many Americans to make the possibility of future war rather remote. In this environment, it is inevitable that the utility of a sizeable peacetime conventional Army will come under sharp scrutiny. To maintain a force capable of performing a role for both deterrence and uncertainty will require mutual understanding that can only result from a socially integrated Army and an enlightened, broad-gauged officer corps. The present trend toward a more narrow conception of professionalism and insularity must be arrested, or a deterioration in civil-military relations may result that could, indeed, call into question the future of the Army—and the nation.

NOTES

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5. Morris Janowitz, "Toward a Redefinition of Military Strategy in International Relations," *World Politics*, 26 (July 1974), 475, 480.
6. Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 377.
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8. Janowitz, p. 500.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 502-3.

10. Anthony Lake, ed., *The Legacy of Vietnam: The War, American Society and the Future of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1976), particularly Philip Geyelin, "Vietnam and the Press: Limited War and An Open Society"; Alton Frye and Jack Sullivan, "Congress and Vietnam: The Fruits of Anguish"; Adam Yarmolinsky, "The War and the American Military"; Earl C. Ravenal, "The Strategic Lessons of Vietnam"; and Ernest R. May, "American Security Interests After Vietnam."
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21. Yarmolinsky, p. 228; Martin, p. 21.
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