

Serving the People

The Need for Military Power

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This December 1976 Military Review article was published in the wake of Vietnam and congressional passage of the 1973 War Powers Act and examines the relationship between the American people and their military. Retired Army Chief of Staff General Fred C. Weyand and then Lieutenant Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr. emphasize the importance of the nation's military honestly and openly communicating its needs and the rationale for those needs to the American people—the state the military serves.

WE BEGAN our Bicentennial Year in a predicament that our Revolutionary War predecessors would understand—the necessity to convince the American people and the Congress of the need for adequate funds for the national defense.

While this has happened before in American history, for most of us it is a new experience. Our careers have coincided with the era of strong presidents and a powerful executive branch. Since at least World War II, the American people and the Congress had been content to permit the president to determine foreign policy and the military policy required to support that foreign policy. We in the military had to convince one man—the president—to obtain the men, money and material we believed necessary for the national defense. Often during this period, the Congress had to be restrained from giving too much, not too little.

But now we have, in a sense, come full circle. Like General Washington, we now have to convince the entire Congress of the needs—and explaining the need for military force, even in wartime, has never been an easy task. General George Washington observed in 1778 that many governments feared a standing army in peacetime, but only that of the United States had such a concern in time of war. That must not be, he wrote. “We all should be considered—Congress, Army, etc.,—as one people, embarked on one cause, one interest; acting on the same principle and to the same end.” And that objective is as valid today as it was 200 years ago.

Military Policy and Foreign Policy

Our military establishment exists solely to serve the political ends of the state—political primarily in the sense of serving as a foundation of foreign affairs and

foreign policy. If that foreign policy dictates making war on another country, the task of the military is to win that war. If the foreign policy dictates carrying on a “peaceful” competition, the task of the military is to support that competition. As General Matthew Ridgway put it, “The soldier is the statesman’s junior partner.”

I am certain that you are familiar with the observations Alexis de Tocqueville made in 1840 when he wrote: “It is especially in the conduct of their foreign relations that democracies appear decidedly inferior to other governments.” The reason, he went on to say, was that aristocracies (today, we could substitute totalitarian governments) “work for themselves and not for the people.”

This “defect” was not so pronounced in the 19th and early 20th Centuries when we were still secure behind our great ocean barriers, or so relevant during the past 40 years when the conduct of foreign affairs was left almost completely to the president. From FDR through the beginning of the Nixon administration, the president determined foreign policy and, most important for our case, the military policy necessary to support that foreign policy.

But the state of affairs has now changed. Witness the congressional limitations on involvement in Indochina, on aid to Turkey, on aid to Angola. This change has brought with it the very problem that De Tocqueville anticipated: “A democracy can only with great difficulty regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in a fixed design, and work out its execution in spite of severe obstacles. It cannot combine its measures with secrecy or await their consequences with patience.”

The truth of De Tocqueville’s observation is supported by the fact that, in times of great national

peril—the Civil War, World War I and World War II—the imposition of presidential war powers made the United States somewhat less of a democracy, whereas, during the Korean War and most especially the Vietnam War, the lack of such restrictions and the free reign of democracy enormously complicated the conduct of the war. Alexis de Tocqueville is quoted deliberately since his observations in 1840 are removed from the passions of today. He is quoted not to condemn or to decry the current state of affairs, but merely to point out a fact of life. It is difficult to conduct foreign affairs in a democracy. It is difficult to construct a military policy to support foreign affairs. It makes it no easier to pretend that such difficulties do not exist.

Where We Are

Surprisingly enough, however, as the Army Staff examined where we have been, it found that we have done rather well. After an intensive examination of political, economic, sociological and military trends, and a detailed analysis of existing American foreign policy, it concluded that the world was in rough equilibrium, and that the United States was in a relatively—and I must stress relatively—advantageous position. We are allied with West Europe and Japan, next to the United States the world's economic power centers. Our potential adversaries—China and the Soviet Union—were also adversaries with one another. The United States was still the world's greatest power. The task, as the staff saw it, was to remain in that position of relative advantage.

While some critics complained that all the Army strategists had done was to legitimize the status quo, such comments missed the essential point. As T.S. Eliot once wrote, “At the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.” And, “knowing the place for the first time,” it was a real eye—opener to see that what at first glance appeared to be a haphazard muddling through had been in actuality a fairly sound military policy protecting American interests and furthering American policies. Our forward deployments in Western Europe and in Northeast Asia were doing precisely what they should be doing—reinforcing our foreign policy objectives in these critical areas.

Part of the answer of how we got to where we are is due to the wisdom of the Founding Fathers. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, for example, in framing the Constitution, insisted that the Army—and, by extension, the other services—should be required to justify to the Congress at least every two years the “evident necessity” of maintaining troops. Because of that Constitutional requirement, the services successfully justified their present sizes and deployments. Those things

that could not be justified—the 500,000—man force in Vietnam, for example—no longer exist. We are, in one sense, where we are today because the American people, through their elected representatives in the Congress, authorized us to be there.

But, as was stated earlier, this is only part of the answer. The Congress authorized us to be where we are largely because it had, in the past, given carte blanche to the president to determine foreign policy and the supporting military policy. Now, it has stopped payment on this blank check. It is no longer sufficient to appear before the Congress and justify requirements with “The president said so.” Requirements must be justified on their own merits, and not only the president but the entire Congress must be convinced, as well as the American people whom the Congress represents.

To do this, we must get back to basics. No longer can we get away with the jargon once used to convince the executive branch—“shorthand” based on a whole series of shared assumptions. The extremely complex reasons for military force structures, for forward deployments, for manpower levels, for material needs, for research and development, must be, not so much simplified, since there is a great danger in reducing complex arguments to simplistic slogans, but phrased in terms that the American people can understand.

Point of View

A major complication in explaining the need for military force to the American people is that we argue our case from a multiplicity of points of view.

We need military forces to fight wars. We need military forces to keep the world safe for democracy ... to protect freedom's frontiers ... to deter Soviet and Chinese aggression ... to match the percentage of GNP [gross national product] the Soviets are expending for their military....

The danger of this fragmented approach was pointed out by Karl von Clausewitz when he wrote: “There is upon the whole nothing more important in life than to find the right point of view from which things should be looked at and judged of, and then to keep to that point ... For we can only apprehend the mass of events in their unity from one standpoint.”

There is only one point of view from which to judge the American military. “How does the American military serve the American people?” The American military exists—was created—to serve the American people, or another way of phrasing the Clausewitzian dictum that the military exists to serve the political ends of the state since, in America, the people are the state.

Our very oath commits us to support and defend, not a leader or a political party, but the Constitution of the

United States. It commits us to serve the people, and serving the people is the only way our existence should be justified. We must explain to the American people how their military serves them. We must explain why they should take a dollar out of their pocket and give it to us. We must explain why that multi—million—dollar tank, airplane or ship is really a good buy for them, that they are getting their money's worth. And that is no easy task. Simplistic arguments about the “threat” won't do it. As General Abrams used to say, “We've got to convince that dirt farmer out in Kansas to take that buck out of his pocket he's been saving for seed grain and give it to us to buy guns with.” Now, the task is even harder. We've got to convince that farmer to take the buck he made selling wheat to the Soviet Union and give it to us to defend him from the Soviet Union. And that takes a pretty complex argument, an argument as complex as the real world in which we live, an argument as complex as the American public to whom we must appeal.

Complexities of the American People

While realizing that no generalization is worth much, including this one, there are certain American characteristics that complicate the task of explaining military policy.

As Ulysses S. Grant—who was laughed off the streets of his hometown of Bethel, Ohio, in 1843 for strutting in his brand new Army uniform—could testify, Americans have a long and proud tradition of irreverence toward and distrust of their military. This antimilitarism stems from a number of causes, but suffice it to say that it remains a constant of American attitudes. But there is no use agonizing over it. If we cannot be loved, we can be trusted and respected, and, according to a Harris poll several years ago, we aren't doing all that bad—not quite so good as garbage collectors, but much better than politicians and the press.

One serious effect of this perceived hostility—especially during the Vietnam War—was a tendency for the military to turn inward, to play hedgehog, curl ourselves up in a ball and shut ourselves off from all outside criticism, sometimes to the point where we even stifled internal constructive criticism for fear that admitting any error would give aid and comfort to our “enemies.” This tendency is deadly. We cannot do this and serve the American people. We must have the courage of our convictions, the courage to face our critics and argue our case. It appeared for a time that we were giving tacit approval to Georges Clemenceau's famous remark that: “War is too important to be left to the generals” when we should have been reminding people that perhaps it was because France heeded Clemenceau's remark

that it lost its next three wars. If we are to serve the American people, we owe it to them to give them our best professional military advice, even when that advice might not be applauded.

Another constant in American attitudes is idealism. Idealism is a powerful force in America, a force that has caused us to rise above ourselves, to hold America to demanding standards.

But idealism also has a negative side. It can cause us to posture and to preach, with little thought for the consequences of such actions. For example, at a recent *Pacem in Terris* Conference in Washington, one of the speakers called for us to “challenge” the Soviets to do better, “demand” a halt to Soviet involvement outside its borders, “convince” the Soviets of the error of their ways, “test” Soviet willingness to live up to their agreements, yet this same speaker is one of the most vociferous critics of the American defense budget. This is a paradox that has plagued the military almost since the beginning of the Republic—the idealist strain in the American makeup calling for us to get involved while the antimilitarist strain denies us the means. For our part, we must point out that we can't have it both ways, that there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Yet another strain, often allied with the other two, is isolationism. Protected throughout most of our existence with friendly—and weak—neighbors, our flanks secured by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, we saw no need for large standing military forces.

And now, while the strategic situation has changed, the underlying attitudes too often remain; while many accept the modern world intellectually, emotionally they are still in the 19th Century.

That is not to say that the American people will not support a large standing military force. After all, they have done so at great cost since World War II. They have to see hard, concrete, compelling reasons to support such a force—reasons sufficient to override their inherent isolationism.

It is for this reason that foreign military commitments are especially suspect. And we have added to these suspicions in the past by explaining these commitments in altruistic terms—“protecting freedom's frontiers... keeping the world safe for democracy.” As Professor Richard E. Neustadt has pointed out, domestic factors are paramount in foreign affairs: “Men are booed and booted out at home, or cheered and re—elected or promoted there ... priorities are set by their own business. What happens on the other side deserves attention when and as it bears upon their own business. All else is tourism.”

To this end, we must scale down the high—flown and pretentious phrases of the past and justify our foreign

commitments with reasons that make sense for the average American. The primary reason, as *The Wall Street Journal* recently editorialized, is that isolationism, far from preventing wars, actually invites them.

And, finally, the last attitude we must consider is the volatility of American public opinion. Attitudes can and do change overnight. Americans can give massive support to a project when aroused, or their emotions can cool. Flexibility, the ability to change direction, to defend the national interest on short notice, is an absolute requirement for the American military.

In considering all of these American attitudes, one could almost make the case that we have done our job too well. We have protected the American people from the horrors of war so well that many believe that such horrors do not exist. They see a perfect, a Utopian, world and fix their anger upon the military as living, breathing proof that the millennium they envision has not yet arrived. But we in the military cannot take such Utopian views. Our duty to the American people demands that we look at the world with a jaundiced eye and that we continue to point out that tigers still roam the earth, tigers that regrettably are not yet on the endangered species list.

We must look at the world, not from a detached academic perspective, but from the view of the interests of the United States. But what are these interests?

Although it is possible to assemble a laundry list of such interests, such a list would be of only temporary value. Some of our interests are transitory, they shift and change with the changes in the modern world. Who would have thought, for example, that today there would be liaison officers from Germany and Japan at the US Army Command and General Staff College and no liaison officers from our World War II allies, the Soviet Union and China. Such a list might even be dangerous because it would give the illusion that our interests could be arranged in rank order, from “vital” interests to interests of little importance.

Interests and Realities

The truth of the matter is that interests of seemingly little importance can suddenly become “vital”—that is, become interests that we will go to war over. If a spy, for example, had broken into the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House, on 24 June 1950, and stolen our most secret and sensitive plans, he would have discovered that the United States had neither the interest nor the intention of defending Korea. Yet the one place he could not break into was the mind of the President of the United States, and, on 27 June 1950, the President decided that Korea was a vital interest, and American troops were committed to action. A “vital”

interest, then, is one that the President says is vital when the time comes that he has to make such a decision—and now, I might add, when the Congress agrees with the President’s assessment.

Although at first glance it might seem facetious, it is probably more useful to say that the US interest is to “do good”—to preserve our way of life, to safeguard the values and valuables of our society, to maximize our advantages and to minimize our disadvantages in dealing with other nations.

We are, whether we like it or not, a leader in the Free World, and it is especially important that we maintain and strengthen our cultural affinities with those who share our values and desire for freedom. We also are the primary “have” nation in the world. We have a stake in preserving our trade patterns, our economic freedom of action. Unlike the “have—not” nations who might profit from worldwide disorder and disarray, we have a stake in world prosperity, in world order.

These broad interests have to be considered in the light of the realities of the world situation. As was said, “tigers” roam the world. The relationship among nations, in many respects, borders on a state of anarchy. Although the idealist might wish it otherwise, there simply is no supernational organization capable of keeping—or, more to the point, imposing—order on the international community. This situation is likely to continue since it appears that no nation—state is willing to surrender that degree of their own sovereignty that would be required to make a world government effective. The nation—state, therefore, will remain the principal instrument of power for the foreseeable future.

What this means is that each and every state is responsible for its own defense. Unless the United States makes provision for its own self-defense, we can depend on it that no one else will. This is our first requirement, then: to remind the American people that the defense budget is not the President’s budget, or the Pentagon’s budget. It is the budget for the defense of the United States and its vital interests.

We must also remind the American people that our foreign commitments, our foreign deployments, are part of that national defense. They ensure that no nation or group of nations acquire hegemony over Europe and Asia and thereby gain superiority over the United States to the point where we become intimidated and lose our freedom of action. This is the reason we fought World War II—to prevent Germany from gaining hegemony over Europe, and Japan from gaining control of Asia. Germany and Japan are still major powers, and our present deployments in Europe and Northeast Asia are in our interests, in Germany and Japan’s interests and in

the world's interest to obviate the temptation for either country to again massively rearm, a rearmament that could ultimately include nuclear weapons.

At the same time, these forward—deployed forces also stake out the limits of those nations who share our ideals of democracy and freedom. They signal clearly the areas we are prepared to defend. And such signals are important. As F.S. Northedge of the London School of Economics recently wrote: “Failure to make clear to a hostile state the borderline between what you are prepared to tolerate and what you must resist may lead to a situation in which the opponent does not know what your ‘point of no return’ is . . . In these circumstances, a war which perhaps neither side wanted can come about through failure of the signalling processes...”

There are those critics who would argue that such defensive measures should be replaced by a world rule of law. But not only is such a rule of law impracticable, given the present international order, it also has other disadvantages. Again, Northedge pointed out: “One possible drawback of the attempt to illegalize various uses of force tends to drive states to invent new uses of force which are not illegalized by the ban. . . . There is little doubt that many forms of force practiced today, such as subversion, insurgency, guerrilla warfare, the hijacking of airplanes, are not necessarily, as they would seem to be, spasmodic acts of violence by aggrieved individuals but acts of state disguised so as to avoid the stigma attaching to illegal acts committed openly in the state's own name.”

We are criticized by our emphasis on war—for harping on that fact that we must maintain constant war preparedness. But this is a reality of the modern world. No longer do we have the days, months or even years to mobilize that we had in the past. Reaction time allowed before responding to the first attack, especially one delivered with nuclear weapons, would perhaps be a matter of seconds. This means that continuous consultation with our allies is an absolute requirement.

Another factor is that the high rate of obsolescence of modern weapons in a state of war preparedness means that defense must take a large share of the national budget. Not only does this take a large share of the US budget, it also takes a large share of the budgets of our allies. And, if this burden of defense is to be fairly distributed, this also requires constant consultation among the allies.

No longer can we allow our interests with our allies to decline, to fluctuate, to be in a state of uncertainty. To gain the protection that our allies give us, we lose some of our flexibility.

There is another way of looking at the world—by visualizing all of the nations of the world on a spec-

trum, with “dominance” on one end of the spectrum and “dependence” on the other. Realizing that even the United States and the Soviet Union are dependent to some degree—the United States for energy resources, the Soviet Union for food resources—the nations of the world can still be arrayed in relative rank order in terms of their dominance or dependence.

Power

This is what power is all about—to determine whether the United States will be dominant or dependent in relation to the other nations of the world.

Professor Klaus Knorr of Princeton University defines power as a form of influence—coercive influence based on the threat of penalties. In the international system, power is a relation among states that permits one government to induce another to behave in a way which the latter would not have chosen freely. Power thus permits a degree of control over the environment.

Now, “power” is currently unfashionable. It has an extremely bad press. But it is interesting to note that those who bad—mouth it the most have also been not a bit bashful about using it to gain their own particular ends. The antiwar and antimilitary activists, while agonizing over power in the abstract, were veritable Napoleons when they marshaled demonstrations and organized marchers in the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to coerce the government to surrender to their demands.

One of the forms of a nation's power is military power. Military power in its ultimate form is the power to kill or destroy, to occupy or control. But it is also a form of power that sustains will. As Professor Knorr states: “Explicitly in the form of threats or implicitly through silent calculations, considerations of military power act as counters in diplomatic bargaining so that, in any serious dispute, diplomacy is a trial of influence and strength, including military strength.”

It is essential to note that military power is not necessarily the same as military *force*. Military force consists of concrete things—divisions, tanks, airplanes, rockets, ships, submarines. These are the instruments for generating military power, not military power itself.

Military power, like all power and influence, is relational. It exists only in relation to particular other nations and regarding particular conflict situations. That is to say, one may talk about the relative military power of the United States vis-a-vis that of the Soviet Union in the context of a given scenario (and remember that a scenario is only an approximation

of reality, it is not reality itself). Only the survivors of a US—Soviet war could tell us what the *actual* military power relationships are between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Short of war, what we deal with is not *actual* military power but *latent* military power—the likely power relationships that would exist if particular countries were pitted against each other under particular circumstances. This latent military power has several dimensions.

The first, and most difficult to quantify, is the state's *reputation* for military power—the power images which rest on the perceptions and expectations of other governments which may or may not be faithful reflections of actual power. For example, in China during the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, the Imperial Japanese Army swept through and occupied a major Chinese city. It stopped short, however, when it reached the French settlement, a settlement held literally by a corporal's guard—a French noncommissioned officer and a squad of Tonkinese infantry. But it was not the squad that held the all—conquering Imperial Japanese Army at bay; it was the prestige of the French Army, then reputed to be the most formidable military force in the world. Events a few years later demonstrated that this reputation was not a faithful reflection of actual power but, at the time, prestige translated into military power.

On the other hand, the erosion of a nation's military prestige means that it must use corps and armies to do what squads and platoons could do previously. It is for this reason that we in the military must guard our reputation jealously, not so much for the sake of reputation, but for the sake of our continued ability to serve the American people. Critics notwithstanding, the American military did not lose the war in Vietnam through defeat on the field of battle. The American military withdrew from Vietnam in good order in accordance with the wishes of the American people—a fact that should enhance, not diminish, our prestige as servants of the American people.

A second dimension of latent military power is military power *potential*—the resources of the state capable of being mobilized. The dynamics of this dimension have changed in today's world—a change little perceived by the public and not fully grasped even within the military. While before World War I and World War II we could mobilize our resources in a rather leisurely fashion, while the marches were held by our allies, today we do not have that luxury. We must be prepared to fight with the forces we have in being—an eventuality that places a high premium on current readiness.

But, even with the caveat of short reaction time, the United States does have an enormous military power potential. Our industrial base, the advanced state of our research and development, our natural

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resources and our trained manpower all put us in a relatively advantageous position. Among the major powers of the world, only the Soviet Union comes close to matching our potential.

A third dimension of latent military power is military power *value*—the proportion of the potential that is actually transformed into military strength. It is this dimension that is being debated today—how much of our gross national product are we devoting to defense. Our own critics would have us believe that we now have a “record” defense budget, but the facts are in direct opposition to the rhetoric. The Fiscal Year (FY) 1976 defense budget of almost \$100 billion is, in constant dollars, the lowest since the pre—Korean War budget of FY 1950. We must constantly hammer home the effects of inflation on the military budget. The fact is that we are spending more to buy less.

The final dimension of latent military power is *skill*—the way in which military power is directed, politically as well as militarily.

Politically, we must ensure that our civilian leadership is fully informed of the capabilities and limitations of our military power. Part of the problem in the past is that our civilian leaders were misled by our failure to tell them the hard truths, the unpleasant realities, our shortcomings as well as our strengths. “Can Do” is an admirable motto—the 15th Infantry has used it for years—but there are times we must say “can't do . . . can't do unless you want these undesirable consequences or these unacceptable risks.”

Another part of skill is our technological advantage. This advantage is real, but it can be oversold. To listen to some of the defense critics, one would think that Soviet military skill still consists of illiterate serfs dragging antiquated cannon through the snow. One would think that *Sputnik* never happened, that all of the real Soviet technological advances never occurred. As the Israeli military could testify, the

Soviets have sophisticated modern weaponry. We do have a technological advantage, but, with over half of the defense budget now going to manpower costs, and a large percentage of the remainder going to operation and maintenance to maintain the current force, less and less is being devoted to research and development to maintain our technological edge.

And that technological edge is all-important for the American military. There is an "American way of war," highly sophisticated, material rather than labor intensive, extremely expensive in terms of "things," but relatively inexpensive in terms of men. And, as "things" decline, the shortfall will have to be made up, as it was in the past, with men's lives.

This is not a new problem. General Douglas MacArthur recounted in his autobiography that, while chief of staff of the Army in the early 1930s, he had a violent confrontation with President Franklin Roosevelt over cuts in the defense budget. Convinced the country's safety was at stake, MacArthur finally exploded with: ". . . when we lose the next war, and an American boy, lying in the mud with an enemy bayonet through his belly and an enemy foot on his dying throat, spits out his last curse, I want the name not to be MacArthur, but Roosevelt."

The President was livid. "You must not talk that way to the President," he roared. MacArthur told FDR

that he had his resignation as chief of staff and turned toward the door. As he reached the door, President Roosevelt said, "Don't be foolish, Douglas; you and the budget must get together on this."

But, sad to say, and as the dead at Pearl Harbor, at Bataan and Corregidor, at Kasserine Pass, could testify, the United States did not "get together on this" until well after we were embroiled in World War II. The debate on the defense budget involves more than just words or dollars. Ultimately, it involves men's lives and the future of our country.

The Task Ahead

Former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger said, "Some years from now, somebody will raise the question why we were not warned, and I want to be able to say, indeed, you were." As military men, if we are to serve the American people, it is our duty to warn them of the need for military power, for an adequate national defense. It is our duty to warn them in terms they can understand, not by rattling the saber and beating the drum, not by apocalyptic visions of world destruction, but by cool, clearheaded explanations of the realities of today's imperfect world. This is the difficult task that we must accomplish if we are to obtain the support we need to do our job of serving the American people. **MR**

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