



A tank of the North Vietnamese army flies the National Liberation Front flag 30 April 1975 at the Presidential Palace in Saigon, capital of South Vietnam. The fall of Saigon to communist forces marked the end of the Vietnam War. (Photo by Alamy)

# Ignoring Failure

## General DePuy and the Dangers of Interwar Escapism

Eric Michael Burke, PhD

Some of the most dramatic consequences in war arise from the faulty calibration of an army's preparations, strategy, and tactics with the political and strategic particularities of a specific mission or foe. As Carl von Clausewitz famously warned, the

"first, the supreme, the most decisive act of judgment" for any senior leader is to accurately assess the evolving political nature and strategic character of a war, "not to take it for something, or wish to make of it something, which by the nature of its relations it is impossible for it

to be.”<sup>1</sup> Long influential mistranslations of the assertion have suggested that conflicts can be neatly categorized into more or less static “kinds” (conventional, unconventional, limited, total, etc.), ignoring the political essence and chaotic dynamism organic to human conflict that the original author had emphasized. Because of this, soldiers and scholars alike have long taken Clausewitz’s admonition to mean that an army must be right-sized and prepared for a specific “kind” of conflict they interpret as looming on the immediate horizon. At the very least, they often assert that preparations made to develop or “modernize” a force during interwar periods must get the equation “less wrong” than potential adversaries.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, no leader can predict with perfect accuracy what kind of challenge will arise on the morrow. One historically prevalent blind spot, however, is the propensity for wars to fundamentally transform from one “kind” to another, via the chaotic exchange of blows and counterblows that collectively comprise them, upending the prior preparations of both belligerents.

The Army’s new Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, refers to these changes as “transitions.” Transitions in military operations can occur between strategic contexts (competition, crisis, or armed conflict), tasks (offense, defense, or stability), operational phases, or branches of a campaign. They can unfold expectedly, as when a headquarters shifts from a main to supporting effort, during task organization changes, or when handing off responsibilities between units. They can also happen unexpectedly, forcing abrupt and often dramatic adaptation from one kind of operation or conflict to another to avoid disaster. Thus, planning for, training, and anticipating possible transitions, most especially those of a potentially major character, represents an imperative responsibility for Army leaders at every echelon.<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz said relatively little explicitly on conflict transitions, but his operative paradigm of war as an essentially chaotic and unpredictable activity certainly implied the likelihood for just such a phenomenon to occur.<sup>4</sup>

While alluring in theory, the imagined ability of many armies throughout history to either avoid deployment to certain kinds of conflicts or prevent the transformation of a war from one type to another has always been an act of perilous self-delusion. The best that leaders can hope for is a force prepared

to effectively manage, cope with, and adapt to inevitably ever-changing circumstances, anticipating the key transitions most likely to occur given their assigned objectives, national strategies, and the operational environment to which they are deployed. Despite this reality, innovative ideas, technological breakthroughs, organizational restructuring, or novel operational concepts have frequently played the role of dangerous siren songs for armies in interwar eras yearning for panaceas that will enable them to avoid what they know to be their most vexing weaknesses and leverage their perceived strengths. Instead of conducting maximally honest, painfully thorough, and uncomfortably comprehensive analyses of major reversals, armies tend to either ignore completely or, alternatively, focus on how they will avoid particular “kinds” of conflicts the next time around. Often this takes the form of plans to decisively win any future conflict so quickly that a transition toward an unwanted scenario will be rendered impossible. In other cases, especially when certain kinds of inconvenient contingencies seem less than existential threats, interwar armies instead pretend that such scenarios are far less important or pressing than other, allegedly more dangerous, alternatives. After all, why prepare for anything but the worst conceivable eventuality? Everything of an apparently less perilous nature will sort itself out. Or will it?

This latter scenario comes remarkably close to describing the early interwar developmental strategy of the U.S. Army in the wake of the disastrous Vietnam War. Due to the long-term implications of decisions made during such an influential period, many of which continue

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1st Lt. Gary D. Jackson carries a wounded South Vietnamese ranger to an ambulance after a brief but intense battle with the Viet Cong during the Tet Offensive 6 February 1968 near the National Sports Stadium in the Cholon section of Saigon. (Photo by Dang Van Phuoc, Associated Press)

to be lauded by historians and soldiers alike as brilliant successes, the Army is still living with their ramifications today. As the force emerges from under the shadow of the war in Afghanistan with far less than a brilliant victory to inscribe on its standard, it is high time to reflect upon how the decisions and predilections of senior leaders like Gen. William DePuy, the first commander of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), set an all but indelible cultural trend in motion in the mid-1970s that still threatens the service's ability to productively learn from its failures and overcome its historical vulnerabilities. Only by eschewing the urge to wish for the impossible escape from that which it does not want to confront can any army grow into the most resilient, capable, and successful force possible. Today's Army leaders have an exceedingly rare second chance to avoid the same pitfalls and get it right this time.

## The "Never Again" Club

Expressing what amounted to a near consensus view among contemporary Army officers in his

reflections upon the Vietnam War within the final pages of his memoir, *A Soldier Reports*, Gen. William Westmoreland defended not only his own decisions and actions as Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MACV) commander but also those of the Army at large. "The military quite clearly did the job that the nation asked and expected of it," he argued, convinced that future historians would "reflect more favorably upon the performance of the military than upon that of the politicians and policymakers."<sup>5</sup> Analysts of the Braddock Dunn & McDonald (BDM) Corporation, charged by the Army in 1975 with producing its only official analysis of the crisis, disagreed with Westmoreland's assessment. "There is sufficient credit and blame to share," they asserted.<sup>6</sup>

The conflict in Vietnam had in many ways simply proven beyond the limits of U.S. capabilities. Although soldiers proved profoundly adaptable at the tactical level, with many commands embracing the intricate challenges of balancing counterinsurgency with repelling invasion by main force communist units, as



Marines of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, rest alongside a battered wall of Hue's imperial palace after a battle for the citadel in February 1968 during the Tet Offensive. (Photo by the Associated Press)

historian Gregory Daddis argues, the complex strategic challenge and “hybrid war” facing the U.S. military—most especially the “limitations of what a foreign force can achieve when advising indigenous armies,” finally proved beyond the pale. The United States ultimately “could not simultaneously create an army, build a nation and fight a war,” even though successfully juggling all three objectives was precisely what the mission required.<sup>7</sup> Heavy reliance upon firepower-oriented “search and destroy” tactics designed for employment against Soviet enemies had only pushed strategic success further away.

While acknowledging the cogency of arguments then in vogue stressing South Vietnamese or communist (as opposed to American) actions when explaining the conflict's ultimate outcome, given BDM's U.S.-focused mandate, the authors sought to address “the main issue facing the United States: why could not our overwhelming military power be translated into equivalent political and diplomatic advantages in Indochina?”<sup>8</sup> After all, as Maj. Gen. DeWitt Smith

observed in July 1977, “We won practically all the battles but, by any sensible definition of strategic objectives, we lost the war.” Forging a practical understanding of how such an unfortunate circumstance had arisen seemed to Smith, “absolutely imperative.”<sup>9</sup>

The BDM analysts felt they knew the answer. While battles and campaigns are among the many tools available to commanders charged with the comprehensive military pursuit of political objectives, combats that prove “unnecessary and costly” could ultimately contribute to strategic defeat, even if they initially appeared to be victories “in the traditional military sense.” Conversely, operations deemed defeats on the battlefield could paradoxically “advance a determined and clever opponent yet closer to his ultimate aim.” American officers had witnessed just such a phenomenon in the form of the near suicidal communist onslaught in the winter of 1968. Despite enemy forces suffering near catastrophic losses on the battlefield, the political implications of the Tet offensive ultimately redounded to their decisive strategic benefit.<sup>10</sup> In fact,



the dramatic political effects derived from American casualties sustained during the offensive only exacerbated the more than three long years of lesser communist “victories” in the form of brief ambushes deep in the mountainous highlands or the “thousands of lives, limbs, and vehicles lost to mines and boobytraps with not one enemy in sight.” These hardly warranted a classification as “battles” in the traditional American military lexicon, but their cumulative strategic effect on shaping both American and South Vietnamese morale and resolve finally proved decisive.<sup>11</sup>

In the final analysis, BDM’s writers attributed defeat not only to a “serious disconnect and mismatch between ends and means” within the American war effort but also on the major differences between a fundamentally “straightforward logic of the U.S. leadership”

authors asked, “Can U.S. combat forces be trained and mentally conditioned for the kind of people’s war that was waged in Indochina?” On its face, given near axiomatic habits of thought deeply ingrained within the American military psyche, the answer seemed doubtful. The historically derived “American Way of War,” as the authors termed it, tended to emphasize the science over the art of war, the physical, temporal, and spatial over the moral and psychological aspects of strategy, and firepower-centered direct-action tactics over more subtle indirect approaches.<sup>15</sup> One way to push back against these problematic habits of thought, the analysts suggested in their “Agenda for the Future,” was to aim for more “broad/flexible” doctrine that changed the U.S. military’s tendency to write and train for “narrow/fixed” operational concepts relevant only to

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as compared with a “subtle ... sophisticated thinking” of its communist foes.<sup>12</sup> Whereas MACV had rested its laurels on conventional measures of progress more appropriate to large-scale combat operations against a near peer, casualty ratios, terrain features “secured,” etc., communist authorities had maintained “a broader and longer-range view, focused more on political and psychological gains and losses, [and] shifts in the overall momentum” at the strategic level of war than on individual battles “won” at the tactical-level.<sup>13</sup> If American officers had outfought their opponents, in the end they were ultimately “outthought.”<sup>14</sup>

The BDM study suggested that crafting a far more expansive American approach to contemplating and addressing the more nuanced political and psychological aspects of war would pay major dividends in the future. Given Vietnam’s lesson that “massive U.S. military power was not the best or only weapon for the Vietnam conflict, at least as it was employed,” the question seemed to be where to go from here. The

very specific “kinds” of wars and opponents.<sup>16</sup> Above all else, the pressing question seemed to be “how better to prepare and employ [the military]? And for what sort of contest(s)?” The latter question, of course, suggested that the Army would, in the future, have the luxury of choosing just “what sort of contest(s)” it would fight.<sup>17</sup>

The conclusions of the BDM analysts were mirrored by those of an especially thoughtful and reflective minority in the Army officer corps. A month after the January 1973 cease-fire agreement was forged between the U.S. and North Vietnamese governments, Army reservist Capt. James Thomas penned an article for the pages of *Military Review* expressing his concerns for the Army’s potential postwar developmental trajectory. Taking a cue from contemporary strategic thinkers like Robert Osgood and Roger Hilsman Jr., Thomas looked back to the years immediately following the 1950–53 “limited war” crisis in Korea. In the aftermath of that early Cold War nightmare, many senior Army leaders had developed a distinct distaste for, indeed repulsion

at the “notion of limiting international violence such as to accord with qualified political ends” in the future. If American political leaders were to call upon the military to exert force abroad, they felt it ought to commit to allowing the employment of all available weapons and tactics to achieve strategic ends swiftly and decisively. “Limited” operations that included messy and seemingly intractable involvement in things like counterinsurgency and nation building had to be

Though it is difficult to gauge the influence Thomas’s editorial had among *Military Review* readers, his ideas resonated sufficiently with Lt. Col. Donald Vought, another Vietnam veteran, to warrant his penning a letter to the editor in May. Vought, too, sensed the formation of “a new ‘Never Again’ club developing” and was most troubled by the fact “that the membership in this club appears to be more senior than the advocates of the opposing view.” The frequent pronouncement issuing from



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avoided. In their view, nothing, to include the employment of nuclear weapons, ought to be left off the table if political objectives were sufficient to warrant the employment of military force. In the minds of many in the Army officer corps, it was this very hindrance of having to fight the communist enemy “with one hand tied behind our backs” that contributed to strategic U.S. defeat in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> If political ends were qualified at all, presidents and Congress should not come knocking on the Pentagon’s door. Thomas referred to such officers as members of the “‘Never Again’ club.”<sup>19</sup>

Unlike so many of his peers, although a Vietnam veteran himself, Thomas felt the mentality inspiring the “Never Again” club represented “a quietly pulsating issue” that “spread, tentacle-like, throughout the Army” and posed a major threat to a force almost certain to be deployed to yet more “limited wars” in the future. “The recent past will thrust itself into the foreseeable future,” he warned readers, as the “fact of limited war as an Army mission remains.” Instead of seeking to ignore or avoid such missions, he felt, the Army needed to capitalize on the 1973 shift to an all-volunteer force and adopt “changes in our training procedures ... designed to prepare our soldiers psychologically and morally for the next limited engagement—should our elected leaders order such.” After all, he posited, an “alternative to what has twice occurred in our recent past [in Korea and Vietnam] might be desirable.”<sup>20</sup>

many in the highest ranks of the Army that Vietnam was “over and so be it” tended to have “a ring of biblical finality about it which I doubt will prove to be the case.” The tendency to assume that future wars would principally involve the maneuver of large combat units in conventional operations led Vought “to suspect that we may not be preparing to fight the next war in the style of the last one but in the style of the one before the last [World War II].” While it seemed hard to believe after emerging bloodied and bruised from such a lengthy war that the Army would simply strive to discard “lessons so expensively learned” and instead seek “to disassociate from that unpleasant experience,” Vought worried that such escapism “may well be manifested in the creation of a professional army no more capable of fighting limited war than that of 1960.” Worse, if such was the case, should U.S. and NATO enemies “refuse to engage in armed struggle in any other form, who will then exert the most influence?” he asked pointedly.<sup>21</sup>

Eight months later, the editors of *Military Review* published similar concerns flowing from the pen of Lt. Col. James R. Johnson, a two-tour Vietnam veteran then serving as a faculty member in the Department of Strategy at the Command and General Staff College. Johnson sensed too many of his fellow officers assessing “the cost to the military” of the Vietnam debacle as having been “too great and assert that Army forces will never be returned to a similar situation.” In accordance with this perception, many likewise asserted “that there

is no requirement to educate and train Army officers in internal defense and development.” Such meddling in counterinsurgency had proven anything but cost-effective, they proclaimed.<sup>22</sup>

Johnson did not agree. Assertions that “no more Vietnams” were on the horizon, and thus the Army needed to pivot toward preparing only for large-scale combat operations “may provide a sense of comfort and well-being,” he wrote, but were “justified neither by historical experience nor by current conditions.” After all, he noted, the Army had engaged in far more low-intensity and counterinsurgency operations across its history than conventional wars. “There is little reason

based on battlefield intelligence.” Instead, the communist doctrine of “revolutionary warfare” had provided American enemies with “the capability of the weak to defeat the strong,” and thus Johnson saw “no reason to believe that the lessons will not be read by the [enemy] planners of future wars.” Without adequate doctrine and training to do so, “how do soldiers fight an enemy who is not dependent on modern tactical weapons systems?” Only a veritable revolution in the Army’s approach to conceptualizing and training all its units for operations across the full spectrum of war could address the deficit.<sup>24</sup>

The incoming commander of the brand-new U.S.

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to suspect that the future will bring substantial changes in ratio,” he presumed, and thus while “some soldiers may, therefore, prefer to study conventional tactics and battlefield technology,” neither the past nor the present global situation justified such habits. If conflicts like Vietnam were any guide, it seemed plausible that “protracted, popular warfare heralds a new period of warfare which is based on a doctrine that emphasizes people rather than machines.”<sup>23</sup>

While most members of the “Never Again” club sensed an alarming atrophy of American capabilities to confront threats at the middle to higher end of the conflict spectrum, officers like Thomas, Vought, and Johnson feared instead that the Vietnam experience signaled a dangerous incapacity of U.S. forces to reliably compete in “limited” and “people’s” wars of the kind they had confronted for more than seven years. “American soldiers ... should devote equal time and seriousness to the study of People’s War when preparing themselves for future conflict,” Johnson insisted. Extant Army doctrine had proven woefully inadequate for such complicated hybrid conflicts, focusing as it did on “mid-intensity nuclear warfare where combatants all wear uniforms, where civilians are regarded merely as possible obstacles ... [and] where decisions are

Army Training and Doctrine Command, Gen. William E. DePuy, could not have disagreed more. Arguably one of the most stalwart card-carrying members of the “new ‘Never Again’ club,” DePuy’s extensive World War II and Vietnam experience had led him to the diametrically opposite conclusion. “Regular U.S. troop units are peculiarly ill suited for the purpose of ‘securing’ operations where they must be in close contact with the people,” he observed. By contrast, firepower-centric tactics were well suited to an officer who, while commanding an infantry battalion in World War II, thought of his primary role as escorting artillery forward observers across France.<sup>25</sup> In Vietnam, his grunts of the 1st Infantry Division had proven especially adept at “search and destroy” tactics focused on finding and neutralizing enemy units with overwhelming firepower. “DePuy viewed the U.S. Army as geared and capable to fight only main force wars,” historian Richard Lock-Pullan has noted, convinced as he was that “Vietnam was an aberration rather than a fundamental challenge to the U.S. understanding of war and the U.S. Army’s role.” Instead, the Army should “gear itself ... to the type of warfare it preferred.” Charged in 1973 by Army Chief of Staff Gen. Creighton Abrams with rebuilding the entire Army training enterprise, refocusing Army developmental efforts to shore-up what

he felt was a dramatic erosion of warfighting skills relevant to deterring and, if needs be, defeating the conventional Soviet foe in Europe, was precisely what DePuy meant to do.<sup>26</sup>

## "A New Ball Game"

Partly due to concerns over the deterioration of Army capabilities in mid-intensity warfare as a result of the prolonged quagmire in southeast Asia, Abrams established the Astarita Study Group in 1973 to evaluate the service's current state as it related to what he and the administration perceived as the free world's most pressing strategic threat—Soviet invasion of western Europe.<sup>27</sup> Although freely admitting that determining "a course for the future is full of pitfalls ... [and is] at best an imprecise science, shaped more by perceptions of the past and present than by visions of the future," the group's advocacy for an Army re-orientation back to Europe was colored by ever more ominous U.S. intelligence noting menacing shifts in Soviet deployments.<sup>28</sup> At least five Soviet armor divisions had redeployed westward, many of which boasted the much-improved modern T-62 and T-72 tanks. Most analysts considered these new weapons systems to be superior to what NATO had on hand to greet them in case of invasion, and even if they were wrong senior Army leaders knew sheer numbers could compensate for any hidden qualitative disparities. Abrams, DePuy, and most of the Army's leadership recognized that a sudden Soviet onslaught would mean defending

western Europe with only immediately available NATO forces in what amounted to a stopgap delaying action until help could arrive from abroad. How long that might take was anybody's guess. The potential price that NATO forces could pay if caught unready, however, seemed to be made starkly clear in the afternoon of 6 October 1973, when forces of an Egyptian

and Syrian coalition thundered across Israeli borders to open what would ultimately be called, among many other names, the Yom Kippur War.<sup>29</sup>

By overwhelming surprised Israeli forces on two fronts, Arab leaders hoped to secure limited tactical objectives and hold them for long enough to force diplomatic intervention by the United States, Soviet Union, or other Arab allies in a manner that would shift the regional political situation in their favor. Victory over the boastful Jewish state, still proud of its laurels won in the 1967 Six-Day War, could also help restore the diminished morale of the Egyptian and Syrian militaries.<sup>30</sup> In short, the Arab coalition sought to inflict "the heaviest losses on the enemy" in order to convince him that continued occupation of territory seized during the Six-Day War "exact[s] a price that is

too high for him to pay."<sup>31</sup> The Israeli security strategy of intimidation would be directly threatened, which Arab leaders hoped would pave the way for "an honorable solution for the Middle East crisis" and a "basic change" in both Israeli and U.S. diplomacy.<sup>32</sup>

The surprise Egyptian attack was launched by five divisions, and within two days, it had secured most of its objectives on the eastern bank of the Suez



U.S. Army Gen. William E. DePuy was the first commander of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (1973–1977). A highly decorated and experienced combat veteran with service in World War II and the Korean War, he was instrumental in focusing the Army almost exclusively on studying, equipping, and training primarily for large-scale combat in Europe against the Soviet Union, which he asserted was the most likely next adversary. He was also known to have minimized the importance of lessons learned in the Vietnam War, together with discounting the need to train for or study counterinsurgencies, regarding that conflict as an aberration in U.S. military history that would not likely be repeated. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)



Canal. Armed with deadly Soviet antitank missiles, a wide net of advanced anti-air missiles, and most crucially, total surprise, Egyptian infantry and armor rolled back astonished Israeli defenders and stunned the world with their rapid tactical success. Egyptian leaders rejected several appeals from major powers for a cease-fire, hoping instead to maximize their territorial gains and solidify the sudden shift in the regional balance of power.<sup>33</sup> Although several Egyptian officers feared a recovery of Israeli combat power backed by U.S. support should Arab forces advance beyond their strongpoints along the canal, successful Israeli counterattacks enabled by the adept deployment of reserves against Syrian forces on the northern Golan Heights required a renewed Egyptian offensive in

U.S. equipment had initially suffered a dramatic repulse at the hands of Arabs armed with advanced Soviet weapons systems. The need to secure every foot of sovereign Israeli territory, the disastrous implications of losing an opening campaign, and the urgent need to land a decisive blow prior to the intervention of foreign powers advocating a disadvantageous cease-fire all matched NATO concerns in Europe.<sup>37</sup> Even so, although historians have long suggested that the Yom Kippur War functioned as a veritable wake-up call for a U.S. Army focused on its quagmire in Vietnam, in fact officers like DePuy had already determined upon a shift of focus back to Europe before the first Arab columns rolled into Israeli territory. As Saul Bronfeld has shown, DePuy himself characterized the war as “a

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the south to relieve pressure on its northern ally.<sup>34</sup> On 14 October, after a delay of several days, a second offensive began, but this time the Arabs were bloodily repulsed.<sup>35</sup> Two days later, Israeli armor turned the tables in a breakthrough back across the Suez Canal. Although both U.S. and Soviet leaders threatened military intervention in support of the belligerents, eventually cooler heads prevailed, and a cease-fire was secured. By the end of the war, with a loss of fewer than three thousand troops, Israeli forces had counterattacked significantly beyond the antebellum borders of the Jewish state and were rapidly closing on the capitals of both their Arab enemies. An entire Egyptian field army was surrounded, and perhaps most importantly, not a single Israeli civilian life had been lost. Almost eighteen thousand soldiers of the Arab coalition were dead, and more than eight thousand captured.<sup>36</sup>

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marvelous excuse ... for reviewing and updating our own doctrine.”<sup>38</sup> For DePuy and the “Never Again” club, unlike the failed quagmire in Vietnam, the Yom Kippur War was the right kind of war at the most opportune moment imaginable.

When DePuy spoke and wrote of the need for “updating our doctrine” in light of the Yom Kippur War and the Army’s need to play “catch-up on modernization, having missed one generation of modernization during the Vietnam War,” he revealed a powerful assumption that the Arab-Israeli conflict was in fact representative of the future in ways that the war in Vietnam had never been, that it was an especially modern “kind” of war, and thus that close analysis of it (and, perhaps more to the point, *not* of Vietnam) would lend itself to improving the Army’s ability to successfully confront contingencies on the near horizon. In one month, Israel had lost more artillery pieces and armored vehicles to Soviet-manufactured Arab firepower than all U.S. Army forces maintained in Europe. A “new lethality” seemed to define affairs on the Middle Eastern battlefield, and DePuy and many others could

not miss the glaring similarities between the Arab-Israeli engagements and those they anticipated unfolding in West Germany.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, the similarities in the tactical and especially technical characteristics of the conflict dominated such comparisons. As they had too often done in Vietnam, Army leaders paid little if any attention to the political, strategic, or even operational contours of the war.<sup>40</sup> They mostly ignored the fundamentally psychological political objectives of the Arab coalition that had effectively nullified the sustainment of grievous battlefield casualties, much like the North Vietnamese before them. Nor did they acknowledge the salient role of the incompatibility of prevailing Israeli doctrine with changing strategic circumstances in the region.<sup>41</sup>

for an unsuccessful United States) a thing of the past. Resistance issuing from the Infantry School frequently raised DePuy's hackles, prompting him to condemn those he termed "the infantry generals" (although branched infantry himself) for their "2 ½ mile per hour mentality." Yom Kippur had been a war of armor and mechanized infantry, he explained, completely alien to the combat methods of Vietnam still taught at Fort Benning. "They didn't understand it," DePuy later related, prompting his sense of a need to "shake them out of that lethargy."<sup>44</sup> He was confident that future wars would resemble Yom Kippur far more than Vietnam, and was unwilling to suffer any significant departure from his priorities. The notion that a future war might contain the potential to transition from one into the

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Nevertheless, the conflict not only confirmed DePuy's preconceived notions of modern warfare but also offered "a means to gain leverage in negotiating Army budgets and to convince the infantry generals ... of the need to change," Bronfeld explains.<sup>42</sup> Despite the clarity of purpose that DePuy enjoyed, resistance to his myopic reshaping of Army doctrine in response to the lessons of Yom Kippur, most especially from the leadership at Fort Benning, was significant.<sup>43</sup>

Infantry officers like Maj. Gen. Thomas Tarpley, then commanding the Infantry School at Fort Benning, and Lt. Gen. John Cushman, DePuy's pick for inaugural command of the new Combined Arms Center (CAC) at Fort Leavenworth, were reluctant to embrace DePuy's eschewal of Vietnam's lessons from the very beginning. Influenced heavily by the predominately air-mobile and counterinsurgency operations the infantry had conducted in southeast Asia for nearly a decade, both officers had a hard time believing that the armor-heavy Yom Kippur War illustrated that such operations were now miraculously (and quite conveniently

other, thus warranting careful preparation for both, remained outside of his consideration.

DePuy's visions only gained further detail following an Israeli-American Exploitation Agreement signed in the spring of 1974, authorizing the turnover of data and captured Arab equipment for U.S. analysis. Over the course of the year several officers traveled on orders to the Levant to collect the data and develop their own conclusions about the lessons of the conflict. Among them was Gen. Don Starry, commanding the U.S. Army Armor Center and School at Fort Knox.<sup>45</sup> The collected fruits of these visitations and analysis efforts culminated in a series of reports on the lessons of the war, the most influential of which was penned by DePuy himself in February 1975.<sup>46</sup> In the report, DePuy concluded that weapons of the modern battlefield were "vastly more lethal than any weapons we have encountered," and that a "highly trained and highly skilled combined arms team" was needed to overcome them.<sup>47</sup> "We are in a new ball game," he repeatedly asserted. The war seemed to illustrate that the Army would one day have to "operate



Israeli tanks of the 143rd Division cross the Suez Canal on the night of 15–16 October 1973 in a maneuver that quickly shifted the initiative of the campaign from Egyptian to Israeli forces. Gen. William DePuy, commanding general of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, regarded the rapid-paced ground movement of armored forces characteristic of both sides in the Yom Kippur War as essentially the same kind of warfare that would occur in Europe if large-scale conflict broke out between NATO and Soviet forces, which influenced the doctrinal guidance he developed for the U.S. Army. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

on a battlefield which is populated with those very lethal weapons in very large numbers and still get the job done without catastrophic losses.”<sup>48</sup> Doing so would be an exceedingly tall order but not an impossibility.

Above all else, mobility was king. “You can’t be static,” he warned. Combined arms assets had to be orchestrated in a way that suppressed enemy capabilities to facilitate a war of maneuver culminating “at the critical point and at the critical time.” Commanders had to “see the battlefield better than the enemy sees it so you know where to go and when to go.”<sup>49</sup> As DePuy knew well, such constancy of relevant intelligence and an ability to “see the battlefield better than the enemy” could not have been more different from that which many of his readers had personally experienced in Vietnam and worried about encountering again. Starry himself had in fact characterized the conflict as a “most difficult informationless sort of war.”<sup>50</sup>

Ignoring such qualms about a kind of war he would just as soon abandon and instead comparing modern

American with Soviet armor, DePuy emphasized the alarming reality that “we have no decisive advantage, nor do they.” Because of this, future war would simply be a matter of what became arithmetical “kill ratios” quite reminiscent of the infamous body counts in Vietnam. “He who has the most tanks on the battlefield will have an advantage,” he insisted.<sup>51</sup> The extended range and penetrative capabilities of advanced Soviet tank guns and antitank missiles meant that if U.S. forces “can be seen on the battlefield, then they will be hit,” DePuy cautioned. “What can be hit, can be killed.”<sup>52</sup> The only way to avoid such a grim fate was to master the use of terrain and concealment when approaching enemy positions and use the tank to take the battle to the enemy. Such masterful maneuvering would require extensive training, and the support of an equally well-trained combined arms team.<sup>53</sup> “The environment of the modern battlefield is becoming more complex, more lethal and more interactive than ever before,” he alleged.<sup>54</sup> It was to become a very common refrain.



DePuy envisioned that the lessons of the Yom Kippur conflict would “determine the characteristics required in our new systems.”<sup>55</sup> It was important for “our schools, our combat developers and those involved in training, to remember these lessons and relate them to our concepts,” he explained. “All that we do,” the general concluded, “must relate to these very important lessons, cross-walked to our concepts, and result in the best weapons, the best tactics and the best techniques for the US Army to enable it to win the first battle of the next war while fighting outnumbered.”<sup>56</sup> The potential risks inherent in such an aggressively single-minded pursuit of readiness for a profoundly specific strategic contingency were ignored. The possible implications should “the first battle of the next war,” or indeed of any future conflict, not follow the script of the Yom Kippur War, or what might happen should such a war transform or transition into a different kind altogether, were left out of DePuy’s brief.

### “Not ... the Smartest People”

Throughout his career, DePuy remained stalwartly committed to increasing combat power at the lowest tactical echelons.<sup>57</sup> This priority, forged in his experiences in Europe during World War II, informed every aspect of his approach to military reform. A veteran of the notoriously hard luck 90th Infantry Division, which suffered 150 percent losses in its officer corps during the 1944 campaign for Normandy, DePuy had emerged from the war with little respect for the innate leadership abilities of American subalterns. Almost all their failures he attributed to inadequate training prior to

deployment.<sup>58</sup> The beating heart of the Army’s fire and maneuver tactics, he reasoned, was learned skill wedded to understanding of weapons system capabilities in the junior ranks. Without these advantages borne of instruction and drill, all the many innate advantages

of American warfighters would be squandered.

Because he tended to interpret his personal experience of World War II as a veritable *sine qua non* of warfare, more strategically messy conflicts like Korea and Vietnam had never fit neatly with his definition of real war, prompting him to reject their legitimacy out of hand. Yom Kippur, on the other hand, with its massed tanks and firepower-enabled mechanized infantry maneuver, was precisely the kind of fight he had in mind.<sup>59</sup> Now more responsible than any other single individual for the future trajectory of the Army’s training and doctrine, the particularities of DePuy’s personal experience increasingly informed the entire service’s approach to war. The general saw little use for high-brow



Lt. Gen. John H. Cushman was the first commander of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In that capacity, he oversaw a rewrite of the new Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, which was disapproved by Gen. William DePuy in December 1974 because it did not address rectifying the shortcomings of the Army in the way that DePuy believed was necessary to prepare the Army to fight the Soviet forces effectively in Europe. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

military theory and strategy at the tactical level, where he felt the Army most required immediate reform. For this reason, he felt the Army needed to tack from an emphasis on military *education* more appropriate for the convoluted contingencies of the Kennedy “Flexible Response” era to one of military training geared toward shaping units and leaders for an imminent Yom Kippur War of their own in Europe.<sup>60</sup>

Although initially charged by Abrams with revamping a collection of personnel issues related the shift to an all-volunteer force, the reform and wholesale reconstruction of Army doctrine and training methods quickly became DePuy’s principal focus as

TRADOC's first commander. Understanding that the only way to prepare the Army for what he was convinced was coming was to show it the way in writing, he announced an expectation that all the Army's field manuals would soon be updated and replaced, bringing each into alignment with his concept of the force's primary mission in Europe.<sup>61</sup> By far the most important and influential of Army manuals had long been the successive editions of FM 100-5, *Operations*,

the field. After all, Vietnam had proven that military operations across the spectrum of conflict outlined in the 1968 FM 100-5 required outside-the-box thinking when the book on hand failed to provide ready answers. Accordingly, Cushman's exceedingly concise draft manual characterized war as a "thinking man's art" that had "no traffic with rules." It also pushed back against the idea, so prominent among those enthralled with Yom Kippur, that armor and mechanized infantry were

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the service's capstone operational doctrine outlining the manner in which the service thought about the nature of war and its role in it. Most recently updated in 1968 to address the obvious lessons from the ongoing war in Vietnam, DePuy was convinced that a new heavily reworked edition was necessary to set the tone and standard for all subsequent manuals composed at the branch schools and centers across the Army. The new FM 100-5 would be more than a field manual. It would be, DePuy intended, a surrogate to revolution and a life preserver thrown to an Army he felt was on the brink of disaster in Europe.

Given the centrality of combined arms coordination that DePuy felt was at the very heart of operations on the new exceedingly lethal modern battlefield, it followed that Gen. John Cushman's new CAC at Fort Leavenworth would bear primary responsibility for crafting the new manual. Accordingly, Cushman attended a December 1974 conference with DePuy at Fort A. P. Hill proudly prepared to brief the TRADOC commander on what he felt would certainly be the Army's next capstone doctrinal manual. Alas, the engineer and MIT graduate-turned-infantry officer was wired quite differently from DePuy, with an academic's intellectual bent mixed with a conviction that the best doctrine was flexible doctrine, avoiding hard-and-fast rules in the spirit of the BDM analysts' prescriptions and emphasizing the need for independent judgment and context-dependent reasoning by Army officers in

the key to future victories. There were no "supreme weapons systems" universally appropriate to all possible contingencies across the conflict spectrum, the draft asserted, meaning that all tools and techniques had to be left on the table.<sup>62</sup>

Quite contrary to Cushman's expectations, DePuy was appalled. The entire premise of the draft manual flew in the face of every conviction he had about the Army and warfighting in general. Warfare was based in timeless principles and "inviolable rules" that arose naturally from the specific quantifiable capabilities of weapons systems, he believed. Moreover, the kind of initiative necessary for creativity in problem solving was profoundly rare among the officers he had known throughout his career, with most requiring simplistic and to-the-point instructions that were strictly prescriptive in their intent. Soldiers needed step-by-step tutelage in "how to fight," not abstractions more appropriate to a war college seminar on strategic theory, he argued.<sup>63</sup> As Cushman himself put it, his draft had intentionally focused on "how to think about fighting" instead of the strictly practical instructional manual DePuy had in mind.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps worst of all, nothing about Cushman's draft promised to support Army acquisitions efforts given its tacit admission that the service could not hope to perfectly predict the most likely contingencies threatening national security. Congressional purse holders had to believe that the Army knew precisely what was

coming down the pike, DePuy believed, and it required a manual that gave just that impression.<sup>65</sup> In short, as Paul Herbert observes, DePuy hoped to craft a manual that was “at once a fighting doctrine and a procurement strategy.”<sup>66</sup> If the Army could design a cogent doctrine, he reasoned, “Then we must buy the weapons that make it work and write the manuals that say how to use the weapons that make it work.”<sup>67</sup> The possibility that the particular political objectives of future conflicts might not ultimately call for such weapons, just as the recent crisis in Vietnam had required a fundamentally different set of tools than those within the contemporary U.S. arsenal, was mostly immaterial to him. Force transformation started with a vision of the future battlefield interfaced with detailed descriptions of plausible tactical scenarios. Diligent calculations given known friendly and enemy capabilities would help identify shortfalls and gaps that needed to be shored up through wargaming and substantiated appeals for additional funding or acquisitions. To DePuy, such logic was unimpeachable. It was also wholly absent within Cushman’s draft manual.<sup>68</sup>

In a sharp rebuke of Cushman’s draft, DePuy dismissed the entire manuscript out of hand, scheduling a new conference in the spring of 1975 and charging Cushman with revisiting the project completely. Understandably upset, the CAC commander did not comply. As a result, perhaps in accordance with his designs all along, in April 1975 DePuy opted to forge his own somewhat informal doctrinal composition team at Fort Monroe. The handpicked officers chosen for the task saw eye-to-eye with their chief in terms of the Army’s most pressing developmental needs, and under his direct supervision, they diligently put pen to paper in a building on post colloquially referred to as “the Boathouse” in order to bring DePuy’s vision into fruition.<sup>69</sup> Even while many officers looked forward to an all-volunteer Army filled with the highest quality recruits available in American society, DePuy remained a product of his career-long experiences in the draft-based force. “Our system does not put the smartest people in rifle squads in the best of wars,” he warned. The infantrymen and tankers habitually serving in the forwardmost units were “great guys but are not articulate,” and most certainly “not intellectuals.” They required doctrine mindfully written “so they can understand.” He instructed the “Boathouse Gang” to craft the new FM

100-5 with this in mind and avoid Cushman’s academic theoretical abstractions. They were to strictly “stick to the arithmetic of the battlefield,” he told them, including abundant graphics throughout the draft depicting the key ideas and statistics buried within the text.<sup>70</sup>

Everything about the new manual represented a profound narrowing of focus in the Army’s official approach to thinking about and prosecuting war. It re-oriented the force exclusively toward preparing for one and only one highly specific strategic scenario. The new doctrine was explicitly designed to pull “the Army out of the rice paddies of Vietnam,” and reintroduce it “on the Western European battlefield against the Warsaw Pact.”<sup>71</sup> It urged leaders to focus on the likely imperatives of fighting outnumbered against comparable enemy capabilities in a “short, intense war” wherein the first battle very possibly might be the last.<sup>72</sup> Provided they could achieve readiness for such a mission, the doctrine’s authors presumed that the Army would be capable of combatting supposedly lesser threats with only minor doctrinal adaptations on the ground.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas the 1968 FM 100-5 had opened with a broad definition of Army operations as “actions, or the carrying out of strategic, tactical, service, training, or administrative military missions,” DePuy instead asserted in its first paragraph that the Army’s “primary objective is to *win the land battle*—to fight and win in battles, large or small, against whatever foe, wherever we may be sent to war.” The 1968 manual had explained at the outset the intricate connections between national objectives, national strategy, and military strategy, along with an acknowledgement of the many forms that conflicts could take across what it called “the spectrum of war.” The Army, its writers asserted, “must be capable of conducting operations under each or all of these forms of war in all geographic areas of the world.” While the new 1976 FM 100-5 admitted that the force “may find itself at war in any of a variety of places and situations,” facing either Soviet regulars or “irregular units in a remote part of the less developed world,” it offered almost no instruction whatsoever on how to combat the latter, nor in the crucial connections between national objectives, strategy, and operations. Much to the contrary, DePuy’s battle-focused doctrine centered upon an interpretation of military operations strictly as “how the US Army destroys enemy military



forces and secures or defends important geographic objectives.” In fact, the new manual completely omitted guidance on “stability operations,” only added to Army capstone doctrine in 1968 to reflect ongoing counterinsurgency challenges and lessons learned in Vietnam.<sup>74</sup>

On 1 July 1976, Army Chief of Staff Bernard W. Rogers approved DePuy’s new manual, published in a three-ring binder intended to underscore its tactical focus and ease revisions.<sup>75</sup> In order to ensure compliance

Levant had achieved one-to-fifty “exchange ratios” against enemy armor, and how his analyses suggested modern artillery could reduce the combat power of assaulting armored units by exactly 33 percent.<sup>78</sup> Once he asserted the need for the professional capabilities of every Army battalion to be increased by exactly 500 percent, supposedly enabling them to dominate at least five enemy units of comparable size.<sup>79</sup> Precisely how such a dynamic set of variables



Due to the narrowly focused doctrine such training methods were designed to support, it paradoxically also contributed to a marked decrease in the tactical flexibility of units trained and specialized to conduct a particular mission or combat role.



with the new doctrine and standardization across the Army’s many branch schools and training centers, the following year, DePuy’s TRADOC instituted a major reform of the Army training assessment methodology. The new Army Training and Evaluation Program established specific missions and tactical training objectives for every unit and formation in the Army, including standardized checklists of requisite tasks and skills necessary to achieve each mission.<sup>76</sup> Representing a profound improvement over the time-based training measurements it replaced, the Army Training and Evaluation Program revolutionized the rigor and doctrinal relevance of training across the Army and set the stage for developing a highly professional and significantly more tactically competent fighting force.

At the same time, due to the narrowly focused doctrine such training methods were designed to support, it paradoxically also contributed to a marked decrease in the tactical flexibility of units trained and specialized to conduct a particular mission or combat role. Even worse, it lent itself to the emergence of an inherently technocratic approach to both preparing for and thinking about war embodied within the new FM 100-5.<sup>77</sup> DePuy’s commitment to such a methodical training philosophy dovetailed with his passion for quantifiable combat capabilities. He routinely discussed how Israeli tank crews in the

was actually to be measured was left unstated, but the implied logic of the statement (or perhaps the lack thereof) spoke volumes.

Historian Richard Lock-Pullan has observed how the challenge of NATO defense “provided the key specificity that is needed for successful innovation, by presenting a concrete problem for the Army as an institution to address.” While unquestionably convenient for officers like DePuy charged with force “modernization,” myopic focus on such a hyperspecific strategic challenge also introduced its own extreme perils that extended beyond the mere ignoring of other possible contingencies. This was most especially the case when, as in fact occurred across the succeeding decades, the feared nightmare scenario never ultimately occurred. Even after acknowledging the major budgetary constraints of the era, as Ingo Trauschweizer asserts, it still “seems likely the ... army could have maintained greater expertise in small wars and counterinsurgency, yet these were all but deliberately neglected.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover, as both Trauschweizer and Lock-Pullan note, the doctrinal, training, and acquisitions decisions made in the early 1970s laid a foundation for future changes that inevitably set the Army on a specific developmental trajectory. For better and for worse (and the vast majority of historians have focused exclusively on the former), future Army leaders could only build upon a structural, ideological, and

cultural bedrock put down by officers like DePuy, which was handcrafted for exclusive relevance in deterring or repelling Soviet armored divisions in West Germany.<sup>81</sup> Choosing to cope with its greatest institutional crisis of the post-World War II era by aggressively abandoning the lessons of its traumatic experience in Vietnam, the Army instead refocused only on what its senior leaders deemed the “most demanding” mission conceivable based on the lessons of a single foreign conflict deemed sufficiently “modern” for relevant contemplation.<sup>82</sup> In so doing, it materially contributed to the struggles it would face in the coming half century as it was forced to engage in painfully costly transitions and laborious adaptations to a dizzying array of challenges fundamentally different from those it had been redesigned to confront.

DePuy’s “Active Defense” was to be only the first in a long line of doctrinal reformations that led eventually to the famed AirLand Battle concept and its Global War-on-Terrorism-era successors, full-spectrum operations and unified land operations. Each of these, while acknowledging (often by sheer necessity) the need for

Army forces to prepare, train, and plan for conducting operations other than large-scale combat against a near-peer foe, struggled to successfully reshape a cultural foundation laid down by DePuy’s TRADOC in the immediate post-Vietnam era. While Army officers had long maintained a problematic affinity for only thinking about the exceedingly rare “big wars” of American military history, despite centuries of involvement in nearly every other conceivable variety of contingency, crisis, and mission, the Vietnam debacle had offered a rare opportunity for the service to pause and critically contemplate its obvious shortfalls in readiness for similar future episodes—like those which would unfold in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, by allowing itself to be actively distracted by senior leaders bent on looking away from the embarrassing elephant in the room, it was destined to once again suffer the bloody and expensive costs associated with unpreparedness when its greatest challenges of the twenty-first century refused to play by the rules it had long been prepared to expect. ■

## Notes

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