

Op-Ed: Where Do We Go From Here?¹

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On January 5, 2012, the President announced a new U.S. National Strategy to support proposed cuts in defense spending that are the result of the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Simultaneously, lawmakers discussed the need to cut forces and change the retirement system for our military in an effort to gain efficiencies in a sort of 21st century “peace dividend.” A key point of this leaner strategy is a move away from a European focus, our traditional area of concern, to one which emphasizes emerging challenges in the Pacific and the Middle East.

An element of the new strategy that will have a profound effect on all of us is the abandonment of the “two war paradigm,” which formed the basis of our current force structure and is the foundation of the “renewed” concept of Air-Sea Battle (ASB). The former was treated as a code of belief by which all budgets were developed, and the latter, a recurring theory since the days of Billy Mitchell, that suggests that machines can do all things all the time. The reality of the matter is that the “Two Major Regional Conflicts” strategy is not absolute dogma, and ASB does not eliminate the use of landpower. Even though the concept is not fiscally driven, it is “fiscally informed” and does fit nicely in our challenging economic situation.

So where does that leave the Army? Actually, not in such a bad place, due to the opportunity before us. Opportunity comes in many shapes and sizes as well as from many directions. This one is coming from the end of a long war and some fiscal realities that we, as a nation, must soon deal with.

We have been at this crossroads before. In fact, this institution, the U.S. Army War College, was formed by seizing such an opportunity, after the Spanish-American War, to solve military failings discovered during that conflict. Opportunity was taken hold of once again at the end of World War II by the creation of the Department of Defense in 1947, a concept rejected by the Morrow Board a mere 22 years earlier. Ironically, the end of the Vietnam War provided another opportunity, which resulted in the development of Airland Battle Doctrine to counter the possibility of the Cold War going “hot” on the Fulda Plain. In each case, we were facing a changing threat and a challenging world.

We have the opportunity to reshape our Army into a force that can still fulfill the three roles that the American public expects from its profession of arms and to do so within the construct of the new strategy and fiscal reality. Our Army, as the Chief of Staff Army so clearly stated in the February 2012 edition of the *Association of the Army’s News*, must be able to prevent conflict, enable allies and contain enemies, and ultimately win decisively and dominantly. At the same time, our working environment

is changing to one which requires land forces to accomplish many nonconventional missions. There are a number of things we can do across the force, and it really means going back to our uniquely American philosophy found in our Constitution of maintaining a navy and raising an army. The American philosophical psyche has always been shy of a large standing army. It is one of the reasons we fought our revolution. So the natural tendency is to reduce the size of the Army after the end of hostilities. Navies however, maintain free access to trade routes. The Air Force falls into a similar category in protecting interests of commerce in the air. The biggest difficulty that ground forces will face in the new challenging threat environment will be “anti-access” and “area denial” or A2/AD. New threats in the cyber world will require us to look at “terrain” differently. ASB addresses A2/AD.

Restructuring our Army into a leaner, lighter active component and a heavier and more consolidated reserve component might be a good first step which supports ASB, while delivering some fiscal efficiency, and fulfilling our three national security roles. Arguments against merging the two reserve components are somewhat territorial and distort realities. The “access” question comes from a notion that the Army National Guard (ARNG) is not a federal force when, in fact, it is; but managed by the state until mobilized. The Army Reserve (USAR) is managed by the Army, but still has to be mobilized. The concern that ARNG forces may be held hostage by their governor doesn’t hold weight with the implementation of Army Force Generating Model (ARFORGEN). Besides the National Defense Acts of 1987 and 2007 codified the access that the Active Component has to the ARNG. The emotional argument deflated; bogeymen exposed.

We have already, in a way, started down the path of emphasizing the militia by placing the Chief, National Guard Bureau on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This gesture alone recognized the third armed force specifically mentioned in our Constitution, and precedent had already been set by giving the Commandant of the Marine Corps a seat.

Heavier forces in the Reserve Component (RC) will give the Active Component (AC) the nimbleness necessary to be the landpower “punch” needed to thwart A2/AD strategies. It will be more cost effective since the forces needed for a protracted conventional war will not require as large a support mechanism as they do in the AC, and they will provide the resources required for the homeland missions, which are ultimately desired much more so by the governors. Additionally, this consolidated reserve component will leverage the civilian skills to police, rebuild, reshape, and transition to civilian governance after the “punch.”

Establishing a continuum of service concept in which members may switch between components as well as between uniform and nonuniform service may be a wise use of a valuable resource: people. That type of flexibility and force mix will give the Army the ability to reach a wider range of talent, while at the same time reducing the size of the standing Army.

We will not “hollow” out the force the way we did at the end of the Vietnam War (or post-Gulf war-1990s). But we still need to reorganize and tighten our belts to meet the new threats and support the new strategy. We must get ahead of the change that is

occurring in our world and develop an adaptable force. That is our opportunity.

There is a place for the Army in ASB. Air and sea forces cannot do it alone. Winning decisively means taking ground and holding it, whether it is cyber terrain or terra firma. As we meet the challenge, we must remember that employment of an air force or navy demonstrates to the world what a nation is willing to fight for. The employment of the land forces demonstrates what Americans are willing to die for.

Endnote

1. Percy Wenrich and Howard Johnson, "Where Do We Go From Here," 1917. It was a popular song written shortly after U.S. entry into World War I in 1917.

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