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Old Myths, New Myths: Renewing American Military Thought

A. J. BACEVICH

Our Army is worn-out. Not in the ordinary sense of being physically tired: on the contrary, units in the field are making it happen with an astonishing energy that comes from having good troops and dedicated, well-intentioned leaders. Rather, what's worn-out is our thinking—the fundamental ideas that give the Army its character and inform its basic policies.

As used here, the phrase “fundamental ideas” suggests nothing so transitory as doctrine or organization or management systems. It refers to the assumptions or beliefs that define the constants in the Army's style of managing its peacetime affairs or fighting its wars. These beliefs do little to explain the differences between the Active Defense of the 1970s and the AirLand Battle of the 1980s. Of far greater importance, however, they help us understand why such doctrinal change, supposedly so far-reaching, has had such a negligible effect on the Army—why, in the eyes of those of us tracing our service back to the 1960s, when so much has supposedly changed, so much remains the same.

The historian William A. McNeill has labeled such fundamental ideas “myths,” emphasizing their elusiveness as well as their persuasive power. According to Professor McNeill, myths play a large role in determining the behavior of any complex institution.¹ In referring to such ideas as mythic, McNeill is not suggesting that they are false or mistaken. Instead, he is acknowledging that such myths are not subject to empirical proof. Seldom factual, such myths nonetheless reflect in broad terms what a majority of the institution's members “know” to be true.²

According to Professor McNeill, institutions abandon or revise myths only infrequently. Doing so is difficult and often painful, usually marking an abrupt historical discontinuity. Even so, Professor McNeill tells us, some capacity for myth renewal is essential to the health of any organization or society. For to carry on, no matter how vigorously, with myths that have become obsolete undermines the relevance of all institutional activity.

Throughout its history, the Army has acted with reference to its own myths. Often at variance with the myths of the nation as a whole, they have provided the Army with an independent balance wheel. The Army's myths have given it a direction transcending political imperatives. At crucial moments in its history, moreover, the Army has been able to discard myths that have lost their usefulness and replace them with myths pertinent to the service's real needs.

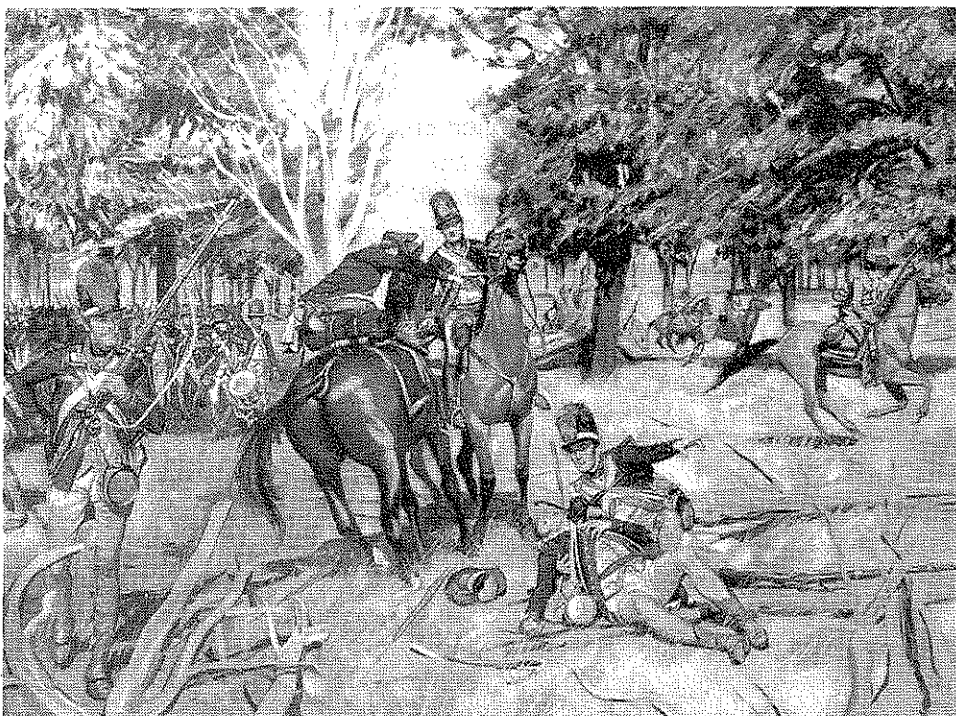
Today, that balance wheel is badly out of kilter. Our current myths are obsolete and need replacement. To understand how we got here and what to do about it calls for a quick review of the Army's myth-history.

That history begins in 1792 with the founding of the Legion of the United States, representing the renamed, reorganized, retrained, and reinvigorated version of what had previously passed for a standing army. To state the matter plainly, the creation of the Legion marks the birth of the United States Army. Although the service traditionally traces its origins back to the Continental Army (1775-1783), doing so requires that we turn a blind eye to history.

The truth is that the Continental Army existed in a unique relationship with both Congress and people. It was created for a single purpose: to win American independence. Having achieved that end, the Continental Army was dissolved, most leaders of the Revolution opposing on principle the maintenance of a standing military force.³

Such naivete soon wore thin. By 1792, Americans had come to accept the need for force to protect national interests and accomplish national objectives. Thus, the specific reason for the Legion's creation was the Indian threat south of the Great Lakes. General "Mad Anthony" Wayne, the Legion's first commander, disposed of that threat at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Although the Legion itself was subsequently

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The Legion of the United States, under General “Mad Anthony” Wayne, routed its Indian foe in Ohio on 20 August 1794. The action is depicted here from the US War Department print “The Road to Fallen Timbers.”

disbanded, henceforth the nation would always retain an army as a permanent instrument of state power.⁴ The tasks assigned to that instrument were many. Yet its primary role remained constant from Fallen Timbers all the way to the slaughter of 500 Moros on Jolo in 1913 by forces under the command of John J. Pershing: to secure territory for exploitation by white Americans, suppressing (and if need be exterminating) any elements (almost always non-white) with competing claims to the same territory.

Two myths sustained the Army through this era of conquest and pacification. The first stemmed from the need to explain the soldier's low esteem among Americans and the Congress's niggardly support of things military. The essence of this myth was that the young American republic was a uniquely antimilitary state. According to this conceit the United States, unlike the bellicose nations of Europe, sought no empire and expected no quarrels with others. The soldiers of such a peaceful nation would necessarily be underemployed, their resulting idleness tempting them into all sorts of mischief. Loaded down with what one historian has called their “anti-army intellectual baggage,” Americans were forever worrying nervously about military conspiracies and military threats to hard-won American liberty.⁵

Embraced by American soldiers, this myth bestowed on the Army a largely imagined but in some ways useful sense of isolation from society.⁶ The architects of 19th-century American military thought—above all Emory Upton—viewed the Army as a maligned and misunderstood institution that fulfilled its role despite having to exist within a hostile national environment. However quirkish and farfetched, this sense of separateness served as a spur to professionalization, enabling the Army to mature in time for its great responsibilities of the 20th century. The myth, in other words, served some purpose.

The second myth, by no means consistent with the first, depicted the Army as the righteous instrument for spreading American values, a strange amalgam of freedom, Christianity, Western manners, and economic progress.⁷ This myth was essential to the Army's retention of a positive self-image. Assertions of America's peace-loving nature notwithstanding, the Army found itself throughout most of the 19th century engaged in hostilities—acting in most cases as the aggressor.

Perhaps this triumphant procession was inevitable. Certainly it served the interests of the American polity and led directly to the nation's rise to great-power status. At the sharp end of the saber, however, the process was not pretty, relying on coercion and brutality. For American soldiers to view their service in such terms was anathema. Instead of dwelling on the dark side of their mission, 19th-century soldiers devised (or adopted from contemporary public discourse) justifications that explained American military conquest in lofty terms. Such justifications applied not only to the Indian campaigns but to other adventures as well: the invasions of Canada and Mexico, the wresting of Cuba and the Philippines from Spain, and even the Civil War. American soldiers fought not to conquer but to achieve the nation's Manifest Destiny, protect the settler on the frontier, free slaves, liberate the victims of Spanish colonial oppression, or uplift Little Brown Brother. At least it was nice to think so.

However useful in sustaining the Army through the 19th century, these twin myths barely survived that century's close. After 1898, expansionism came to an abrupt end. Empire-building acquired a bad name. No longer were there Indians to tame (although restive Filipinos provided an occasional substitute). No longer did Americans covet the territory of unruly neighbors. For the Army to depict itself as the righteous purveyor of American values no longer made sense. Nor did soldiers any longer find solace in seeing themselves as a gallant band of brothers set apart from the rest of society.

As the new century opened, the Army needed a new purpose as well as a niche in the mainstream of American life. Although Upton remained a revered figure, a new generation of leaders rising to prominence after the war with Spain chose the unity of Army and people as their essential theme. Foremost among this generation were Leonard Wood,

Pershing, and George C. Marshall. Standing in the shadows behind each of these titans was John McAuley Palmer, the 20th century's antithesis of Upton and chief purveyor of the new myth—that of a popular Army and the citizen soldier.

What threat to American interests would give the Army its new purpose? This was the question that the Army's leaders pondered through the early years of the 20th century. They found their answer in the prospect of war against other great powers—war stemming from threats to America's Pacific possessions, from the strategic importance of the Panama Canal, or from the spread of European militarism. Such a war would be fought on an immense scale, unprecedented both in the material it would consume and the soldiers it would devour. Assuring victory required, among other things, a mass army, comprising hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

The Army's post-Civil War establishment, a standing force of less than 30,000 backed up by a ragged militia, would never suffice for such a war. What the United States needed was a much larger force, one necessarily composed largely of reservists. These reservists would differ from their predecessors by maintaining a high degree of readiness, permitting their employment soon after mobilization.

So the Army that in Upton's day had despised the citizen soldier now embraced him as the keystone of the nation's military policy. This change of heart on the part of the regulars had far-reaching implications.

On one level, the new myth released an outpouring of propaganda designed to convince the American people and their soldiers that they were one. Throughout the period encompassing the World Wars, Palmer served as the most energetic and effective promoter of this viewpoint. In *An Army of the People* (1916) and other books, Palmer argued that the Regular Army's principal peacetime role was to train the ranks of the citizen soldiers on whom the nation would rely when war began. Such a people's army would not only provide the fodder for a great-power war, but would be better suited "to the genius of a democratic people" than would a force composed largely of regulars.⁸

More substantively, the belief that the United States must rely on the citizen soldier led to a series of initiatives aimed at establishing that people's army. None of these schemes—Leonard Wood's Plattsburg Movement, Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison's ill-fated Continental Army of 1915, the National Defense Acts of 1916 and 1920, or the Citizens Military Training Corps—succeeded. Indeed, as the basis for a realistic military policy, each was hardly better than a bad joke. However enthusiastic the Army's leadership, the Congress during peacetime would not pay for a citizen's army, and the American people would not support it with their sons. In practice, the citizen soldier remained no readier for war than had been his counterpart in the 19th-century militia.

Obscuring the citizen army's failure as a military policy was the American experience in the World Wars. Won by huge draftee armies, the wars seemed to vindicate the popular faith in the citizen soldier who marched from farm or factory into battle and returned victorious. As such, the wars sustained the myth of the people's army long after it might otherwise have died.

This notion that the World Wars vindicated the citizen army concept is hokum, the product of historical anomaly that twice—from 1914 to 1917 and again from 1939 to 1941—allowed the United States a grace period during which it could gird for war while the other powers furiously waged it. Providence thus preserved the United States from the certain disaster that would have occurred had it sent hastily mobilized forces directly into combat. In both wars, citizen soldiers required lengthy and intensive training after coming on active status before being considered even marginally battle-ready.

In the mind of many a World War II veteran, that myth survives intact. Although senior leaders have been obliged to pay it continuing lip-service, most regulars gave up on the concept of the citizen soldier soon after 1945. Three factors accounted for the myth's demise. First was the atomic bomb, the mere existence of which seemed to subvert all previous concepts of land combat. Second was General Marshall's inability to muster congressional support for Universal Military Training after World War II. Ill-considered, even quixotic, Universal Military Training was the Army's last-ditch effort to institutionalize the concept of the citizen soldier. Third was the Korean War, bursting with terrifying unexpectedness upon an ill-prepared Army in the summer of 1950. Korea taught the Army that it could no longer count on a period of extended preparation before being committed to combat. Units had to be ready to fight without warning, implying a level of readiness that none but regulars could hope to achieve.

Once these developments had demonstrated the unworkability of the myth of the citizen soldier, the Army discarded it.⁹ In its place the service substituted a powerful new series of myths that blended Cold War ideology, expediency, and the conventional wisdom of the day. No more subject to proof than their predecessors, these myths remain very much alive. They are three in number:

- The chief threat to American security is Soviet expansionism, above all the Soviet determination to control Western Europe. For the Army, therefore, Europe is the priority theater.

- Offsetting the Soviet bloc's huge numerical advantage requires the Army to capitalize on American technological superiority. This explicitly includes the integration of nuclear weapons into ground forces.

- Since the actual use of nuclear weapons is unthinkable and the

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consequences of even a conventional European war are horrifying to contemplate, the Army exists less to fight wars than to deter them.¹⁰

These myths have played a crucial role in making the Army what it has been for the past forty years. They account for the primacy enjoyed by US Army Europe in manning and equipment. They explain our doctrinal preoccupation with high-intensity conflict against the Warsaw Pact (as exemplified by the perennial use of the Fulda Gap in tactical problems). Most significantly, these myths underlie the proliferation of nuclear weapons down to the Army's lowest tactical echelons.

During the early years of the Cold War, these myths served the Army well. Faced with the consolidation of Stalin's grip on Eastern Europe and lacking a German army to serve as a counterweight to the Russians, Americans acted prudently in assigning military priority to Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Anxious to retain a role in the radically changed postwar military order (and to preserve its institutional well-being), the Army could hardly be blamed for embracing new missions such as continental air defense and for incorporating fashionable nuclear weapons into its arsenal. In the 1950s such a course seemed to make sense.

Yet whatever their validity when first devised, these Cold War myths have lost their relevance. Indeed, they are the source of our present stagnation. Nothing demonstrates their irrelevance more clearly than the history of the postwar era.

The myths fail whether considered against what has not happened or against what has. What has not happened, and seems increasingly improbable, is a Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe. The images that once gave the Army's Cold War myths a certain plausibility—monolithic communism hell-bent on achieving world domination through outright military aggression—lack their former persuasiveness. In the 1980s we see the Soviets differently, not benign surely, but cautious, burdened with a discredited ideology, beset with economic problems, and hard-pressed to keep their existing empire from unraveling. It is difficult to conceive of the

Soviets today summoning up the appetite to consume Western Europe. To the extent that land forces help convince the Soviets to leave Western Europe alone, it is likely the formidable new German army as much as the American one that gives them pause.

The Cold War myths preparing the Army for a European war that has not come left it ill-prepared for conflicts elsewhere that did occur. Surely, this is the central irony of our post-World War II military experience: an Army preoccupied with deterring the Soviets found itself instead actually fighting people other than Russians in far-off places like Korea and Vietnam, each time in circumstances far different from those that our soldiers had been led to expect. In other words, the overarching myths guiding our postwar military thought have not pertained to what the nation has called upon the Army to do. Soldiers lulled by the comforting logic of deterrence found themselves fighting desperately—at times virtually without warning. Conditioned to view the Soviets as their enemy, American troops instead battled Chinese communists, Vietnamese peasants, Dominican leftists, and Cuban construction workers. Coached into believing that nuclear weapons had changed warfare irrevocably, they fought wars where such weapons had no place. Here, certainly, lies one explanation for the shortcomings of the Army's performance in those conflicts.

So the service needs to replace its Cold War mythology. The Army needs myths that support the requirements it can expect to face during the closing years of this century. Where will these myths come from? Myth formulation in the past has not resulted from rational calculation. What we believe fundamentally as an institution derives instead from a host of sources—from intellectual currents inside the military and without, from international trends and technological developments, from great leaders with all their insights and idiosyncrasies.

Still, we can hazard a guess as to some myths that might carry the Army into the next century. Certainly, we can nudge ourselves in the direction of myths that take account of the climate in which the Army finds itself. Certain aspects of that climate are key.

First, the economic and military dominance that the United States enjoyed immediately following World War II is gone forever. The rise of other nations to economic prominence has come, at least to some extent, at American expense. Although the United States remains the West's preeminent power, its position relative to its friends has deteriorated. Important American allies each have their own world view, making it extremely difficult for Washington to line up even friendly governments in support of American objectives.

Further complicating things has been the diffusion of military power over the past three decades. Nuclear proliferation, the booming

traffic in arms to the Third World, and the perplexing riddles of terrorism and revolutionary warfare have contributed to the rise of military powers that the United States might once have ignored. Today we ignore them at our peril. Although the United States need not fear nations like Cuba or Iran, it must reckon seriously with their military capabilities.

Some Americans find reassurance in being told that it is still "morning in America." As a metaphor for the nation's strategic predicament, however, such rhetoric fails. We have reached the late afternoon of America's day. Our situation compares to that of Great Britain in the latter part of the 19th century: still the world's greatest power, but forced to recognize that its obligations were fast outstripping its resources; unable to preclude change, but retaining the capacity to deflect it so that the outcome favored British interests and preserved British influence.

From what sources will threats to American interests come? This is the second relevant aspect of the international climate. We can expect conflicts embroiling the United States to derive less from ideology than from disputes rooted in history, religion, and economic competition. And we can expect those disputes to erupt not in Western Europe, but on the periphery, where the forces for change are most active. The great need of American statecraft is for instrumentalities able to answer effectively the challenges to American interests from these rimlands. As for the military's role in such efforts, limited resources combined with limited domestic tolerance for war demand prompt and efficient mission accomplishment—without resorting to nuclear weapons.

What "myths," then, might prepare the Army for such circumstances? Here are three candidates, with speculation regarding the implications of each:

- *The Army exists to fight.* The American contribution to deterrence lies chiefly with its strategic nuclear forces. The business of deterring the Warsaw Pact belongs primarily to the Air Force and Navy, with the Army playing only a supporting part. This is not to say that the Army must accept an unimportant role in national defense. As a status-quo power in an unstable world, the United States has found again and again that its deterrent is unavailing, creating situations requiring the employment of American forces. This is the critical arena in which the Army, as so often in the past, will be called to appear. The scarceness of land forces militates against giving equal weight to both deterrence and fighting. The Army must direct the preponderance of its energies toward the battle that it will fight, not the one it would like to prevent. Nuclear weapons have no place in a fighting Army.

- *War occurs on the political periphery, not in the center.* Apart from the threat of terrorism, European security is likely to remain intact. Since 1962 the Soviets have carefully avoided direct confrontation with the United States and its NATO allies. Although US Army Europe should not

strike its tents and go home, no longer must it receive first claim to resources. Elsewhere in the world—in Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and perhaps Africa—events contrary to US interests are likely to entail the commitment of American forces. Priority of resourcing should go to units based in the continental United States, both light and heavy, that will bear the brunt of rimland fights.

• *Forces in being will conduct the fight.* Intervention by American ground forces will continue to occur on short notice, without a formal declaration of war. Because political support for deploying reserve components is doubtful, the Army must plan to get the job done using regulars alone. Engaged in dirty wars where moral certitude may be in short supply, these professionals will fight not for ideals but to advance the interests of the state. Their effectiveness will stem less from having the right cause or even the right hardware, than from the toughness, resilience, and cohesion of individual units.

T rue to the American national character, the Army views itself as a dynamic institution. Change abounds, with new weapons entering the field, doctrine undergoing revision, units reorganizing, and new policies being promulgated on everything from counting blankets to measuring body fat. We spare nothing in our efforts to shape tomorrow's Army: we will make things better.

Yet despite all this profligate expenditure of energy, in the trenches things remain much as they were. Captain Nathan Brittles, the character played by John Wayne in the movie "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," had it right when he observed that "The Army is *always* the same."¹¹ Reforms announced with great fanfare are absorbed without having their promised effect. The Army's essential character endures.

As Americans, we are uncomfortable with the thought that the core of the Army's identity is mythic—that it cannot be counted or boxed and certainly cannot be fine-tuned. We bridle at the notion that critical determinants of the Army's performance lie beyond the reach of regulations or orders or white papers.

Yet if Professor McNeill's insights have merit—something impossible to prove conclusively—current efforts to reform the Army may fail.¹² If McNeill is correct, the details of doctrine, weapons, and organization will avail us little unless they have their basis in myths that are right for our time. In that case, an urgent priority for those who care about the Army and for those who would guide its destiny must be to insure that our myths are in good repair. In that regard, much remains to be done.

NOTES

1. William H. McNeill, "The Care and Repair of Public Myth," *Foreign Affairs*, 61 (Fall 1982), pp. 1-13.

2. To illustrate the concept of myth, we can apply it to the case of post-World War II America. A list of myths that have guided US policy since 1945 would look something like this:

- Communism is inherently evil and its spread endangers American national security.
- The survival of the West requires the United States to play a preeminent role in world affairs.
- Democratic capitalism is the only system capable of bringing about economic development while maintaining a balance between individual freedom and equality of condition.

Such concepts lie beyond proof. Since 1945, however, they have been deeply felt by most Americans and by virtually all national political leaders. These myths of postwar America connect Harry Truman with Ronald Reagan.

3. Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and the American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1979), p. 351.

4. Lawrence Delbert Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 130-32.

5. Don Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition* (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 101.

6. William B. Shelton, "The Army in the Age of the Common Man, 1815-1845," in *Against All Enemies: Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Kenneth J. Hagan and William R. Roberts (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 98-99, 106.

7. Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. xiii-xiv, 8.

8. I. B. Holley, Jr., *General John M. Palmer, Citizen Soldiers, and the Army of a Democracy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 714-21.

9. Increased attention recently paid to reserve components suggests an attempt to resurrect the citizen soldier myth. The aim is to escape from the bind caused by the decision to cap the Army's active-duty strength at 781,000. That decision has created a high-quality Army, but one that is too small for the Army's myriad missions. This imbalance between means and requirements has led to new interest in using reserves to make up the difference. Although publicly the Army leadership is unswerving in supporting what it calls the One Army concept, privately many officers express reservations about the ability of reserves to fight on short notice. See, for example, "General, His Real Opinion Asked, Faults Host of the Army's Ways," *The New York Times*, 21 September 1986, p. 19.

10. The lead sentence of FM 100-5 (1986 edition) states that "The overriding mission of US forces is to deter war." US Department of the Army, *Operations, Field Manual 100-5* (Washington: GPO, May 1986).

11. For a scholarly assessment that reinforces Captain Brittles, see "Introduction," in Hagan and Roberts, p. xxi.

12. The short history of the Army's light infantry initiative lends evidence to the need for new myths. The controversy provoked by that initiative illustrates the hostility facing any proposal for change when it lacks the support of appropriate myths. However imperfect as currently configured, light, rapidly deployable forces are absolutely essential for missions that the Army can expect to receive. The creation of light divisions testifies to the recognition among senior leaders that the Army has overemphasized its NATO-oriented strategy of deterrence. Yet despite four-star support, light infantry has provoked widespread opposition from within the service—especially from the armor/mechanized community. Opponents of light infantry have fashioned a devastating critique, citing problems of sustainability and defense against armor. Their conclusion: the concept is fatally flawed and should be discarded, thereby freeing more resources for the Army's *real* mission of deterring the Warsaw Pact. Although this dispute sounds like an old-fashioned turf battle, its roots are mythic: the depth of the armor/mechanized community's opposition to light infantry stems directly from its beliefs in the old myths. As long as those myths remain intact, any proposal failing to contribute directly to deterring war in Europe is likely to be shouted down. Replace the existing myths with others that establish the primacy of fighting on the rimlands, however, and the tenor of the light infantry debate changes. Critics would by no means be silent. But they would concentrate their efforts not on destroying the light infantry initiative but on making it work—a goal that can be achieved only with full support of the armor/mechanized brotherhood.