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The Army and the Great Depression

THOMAS W. COLLIER

The Great Depression shook Americans and their institutions in many ways, and shook them hard. The US Army saw itself as one of the worst shaken and as crippled in its efforts to modernize. In Caroline Bird's excellent account of the Depression, *The Invisible Scar*, she writes that the Army was cut back so far that "until 1935 we did not have enough modern rifles to arm a single regiment."¹ And yet within ten years the Army would fight and win its greatest battles. How could that be? What exactly were the effects of the Depression on the Army? What else was happening in the Army of the 1930s? A look at the Army during the interwar period and a glance at the Depression's effects on other armies may give us some answers.

The most striking fact that emerges is that the Army entered the decade of the 1930s in such terrible shape that the effects of the Depression on it do not look so critical.² The Army of 1931 was already understrength and underfunded, outdated in its doctrine and equipment, stagnant in promotions, untrained at division and higher levels, and largely without purpose, hope, or new ideas. As a peace-loving nation, America had thought hardly at all about military affairs since 1919. This was due in part to genuine revulsion against the experience of the World War, but it was far more a simple lack of interest by the public, the Congress, and the President in anything as remote as war. When Americans sought "normalcy," they defined it in part as having to pay little attention and less money to the Army. That had been the norm since the founding of the Republic. By 1922, the Army had dropped from over three million men to its prewar strength of 133,000, and it hovered around that strength until 1935, ranking roughly 17th in size among the world's armies. But that was less important than the aging of its materiel and doctrine, both of which were 1918 models.³ Even the Army Air Corps, which was the one arm that energetically developed new equipment and ideas, was using them to solve the problems of 1918. Outside of the Air Corps, Army

research and development slowed, and procurement was even slower; some of the few new items that were developed, such as the 37mm antitank gun, were obsolete by the time they were procured. Planning also had become anachronistic. In 1933, General Douglas MacArthur, Chief of Staff of the Army, estimated that the Army could mobilize for war in four to six months.⁴ This was not only an overly optimistic simplification of the problems of mobilizing an outdated Army, but it actually hurt the Army. A typical "can do" response of poor-but-proud Regulars, it was of course taken by civilians as proof that the Army was ready to defend the nation. What possible threat to America could develop within six months? What need was there to spend more? The Army was thus stuck. If it had starved in the prosperous 1920s, what hope did it have to fatten in the Depression?

In personnel strength, the Army had entered the first World War with an authorized strength of 186,000, but typically it had in early 1917 money enough for only 133,000.⁵ After the war, Congress and the Army agreed on a strength of 280,000, writing that number into the National Defense Act of 1920. This strength remained on the books throughout the interwar years, but as early as 1922 it had become a pious hope rather than a planning figure. Congress consistently refused to appropriate money for more than half that strength. Twenty years were to pass and Poland and France were to fall to a new kind of warfare before the 1920 goal was reached. The Depression itself merely reinforced the shortages in personnel strength and appropriations.

And yet, because of the conservative thinking of the Chiefs of Staff, including General MacArthur, the low personnel strength disproportionately slowed research, development, and procurement. The Chiefs were still thinking of combat power as manpower, and of a mass infantry army as the key to victory. Echoing the best military thinking of earlier times, MacArthur insisted in the 1930s that personnel be cut no more and instead be built up to a minimum of 165,000. He took money from materiel to fund this buildup, and so passed the most severe economies of the Depression on to the modernization of weapons and equipment. MacArthur cut to new lows the funds for the Ordnance Corps, which researched and developed almost all equipment except trucks and airplanes, and he practically stopped procurement. He disbanded the relatively expensive experimental armored force at Fort Meade, the Army's one serious effort to develop a new doctrine and organization for ground warfare, and he refused Air Corps requests for the establishment of a unified combat force composed of the fighting units of the air

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arm under a "General Headquarters Air Force." As soon as Congress appropriated the money in 1935 for the additional men that he wanted, however, MacArthur almost doubled the Ordnance Corps' research and development funds, bought a thousand trucks, tripled aircraft procurement, and implemented the GHQ Air Force.⁶ The point is that it was policy, not poverty, that had killed modernization. Had MacArthur and the other Chiefs wanted a modern rather than a mass army, they could have done much to develop one. They allocated to the Ordnance Corps less than 3.5 percent of the Army budget from 1922 to 1935. After 1935, they slowly upped Ordnance's share until 1939, when it suddenly jumped to almost 25 percent. The modernization debt had come due.

The story of the Ordnance Corps is worth a closer look, since its responsibilities for materiel modernization were so broad. While always short of money, the Corps also had other equally serious recurring problems. After the World War, the Army made no systematic study of the requirements for a modern force until the Protective Mobilization Plan of 1937. With little guidance on priorities, the Ordnance Corps was required to satisfy all of its customers, the arms and services of the Army; and so it did a little research and development for each one. It spread its scanty funds over 224 separate projects, ranging from medium tanks to rifles.

One of the better-organized customers of the Ordnance Corps was the Field Artillery, which had convened the Westervelt Board in 1919 to set priorities for a comprehensive artillery motorization and modernization program. Even in that forward-looking arm, however, officers were still arguing in 1938 about trucks versus horses, and only half of the artillery battalions had been motorized. The development of the 105mm howitzer was probably the key artillery/ordnance problem of that era. The Westervelt Board had recommended in 1919 that the heavier and more lethal 105mm howitzer replace the famous French 75mm gun as the standard light artillery piece. The Ordnance Corps responded by developing an excellent howitzer in six years, but it was not finally standardized for production until 1934. By then there were no procurement funds available, and in any case the Field Artillery asked the Ordnance Corps to redesign the howitzer carriage for high-speed towing by trucks. Ordnance did this, and the howitzer finally went into limited production in 1939, twenty years after the original decision. In those years, the Field Artillery had used a considerable part of its Ordnance development funds to modify the French 75s for high-speed towing. Ordnance completed that modification just in time for the new 105s to replace the now-motorized 75s.⁷ Clearly not all of the Ordnance Corps' problems were fiscal.

The botched development of the medium tank, the antitank gun, and even the M1 rifle make the howitzer episode seem like a success story. Organizational confusion was compounded by poor use of technical intelligence

on foreign developments and even more by the Army's "can do" spirit. Ordnance officers testifying before Congress regularly asserted that American equipment was the best, while the annual reports of the Chiefs of Ordnance and the Secretaries of War proudly dwelled on what had been done rather than what was still to do.⁸ Historians now characterize the 1930s as a period of low combat readiness in the Army, but Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley reported in 1930 that the Army was "more efficient today than at any time since the World War." He noted the arrival of the Depression the next year, but wrote that the Army was making "steady and healthy progress" toward fulfilling the goals of the National Defense Act of 1920—which it had been working on for 11 years and would not reach for nine more.⁹

Another characteristic of the entire interwar period, in addition to the Army's budgetary limitations and modernization problems, was the obvious neglect of and even contempt for the Army by the American society at large. Anton Myrer's carefully researched novel, *Once an Eagle*, brings to life the damaging effect this had on the morale of officers and men. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose morale was surely less damaged than most, wrote that the Army in 1940

... mirrored the attitudes of the American people. . . . The mass of the officers and men lacked any sense of urgency. Athletics, recreation, and entertainment took precedence in most units over serious training. Some of the officers in the long years of peace had worn themselves deep ruts of professional routine with which they were sheltered from vexing new ideas and troublesome problems. Others, bogged down in one grade for many years because seniority was the only basis for promotion, had abandoned all hope of progress. . . . Equipment of all sorts was lacking and much of that in use had originally been produced for the National Army of World War I. . . . The greatest obstacle was psychological—complacency still existed!¹⁰

There were bright spots in the gloom, and the Army Air Corps was one of them. Determined to follow the lead of Britain's Royal Air Force and get out from under the Army, such excellent leaders as General Henry H. Arnold were buoyed by their sense of mission and transmitted their élan to the rank and file. Always on its mettle, the Air Corps coaxed from the grudging Army just enough money to survive but never enough to compromise its crusading spirit. In spite of the air mail fiasco of 1934 (the Air Corps was forced to fly the nation's air mail for four months, with dismal results¹¹), General Arnold later wrote that by 1935 the Air Corps was ready for the future: "We had the airplanes, accessories, installations, the gadgets, the techniques, and the know-how to provide Air Power for the United States."¹² The Air Corps had weathered the worst of times and emerged with a cadre of energetic leaders, a new doctrine for strategic bombardment, and a handful of new aircraft developed specifically to embody that doctrine.¹³ Arnold and

the Air Corps were ready when, as he later said, “I was given \$1,500,000,000 and told to get an air force.”¹⁴

The New Deal was another bright spot for the Army, although the brightness was initially dimmed by reduced appropriations and a 15-percent pay cut. Even at reduced pay, military employment was preferable to no employment, and consequently the number of officer resignations and that of enlisted desertions were both very low throughout the Depression. Meanwhile, the modernizing effects of the Public Works Administration projects proved important to the Army. In addition to building new barracks and family housing, the PWA funded the Army’s purchase of trucks, which were sorely needed. Truck purchases had dropped from inadequate in the early 1930s to zero in 1933, but in each of the next two years the PWA gave the Army \$20 million to buy trucks. By 1935, the Chief of Staff boasted that motors had replaced horses except for “certain minor functions.”¹⁵ This was not quite true, and it infuriated the cavalry; but the fact was that the PWA had at last gotten the Army rolling.

Many Army officers were less enthused about another New Deal agency, the Civilian Conservation Corps. It seemed to them a mass of civilians in hopeless confusion, and a distracting burden. The Chief of Staff, General MacArthur, fully accepted the mission, however, and the General Staff immediately started planning to process the recruits and send them off to camps to work for the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. Within ten days, it became clear that there were no camps, no organization, and no chance that Agriculture and Interior could create either. The Army suddenly



Horse-drawn 75mm howitzers of the 82d Field Artillery Battalion. Shown during Third Army maneuvers in Texas-Louisiana, May 1940.

received, by default, the entire responsibility for the CCC, except for recruiting and the technical supervision of forestry projects.¹⁶ The near panic that followed turned out to be an excellent rehearsal for the mobilization that would come in a few years. In the shorter run the CCC gave paying jobs to about 5000 Army Reserve officers, and even some Regulars became enthused. Colonel George C. Marshall called it “the best antidote for mental stagnation” and enjoyed working with the young men, whom he believed were the essential raw material for any future mobilization.¹⁷

Other bright spots in the Depression gloom were the Army’s General Staff system and the network of professional schools for officers. Between them, they kept up the planning for military and industrial mobilization and trained the small officer corps in the staff and command duties of an expanded wartime army. Their failure was a failure of vision and imagination: from the top down, their thinking proceeded in terms of mobilizing, training, and fighting a mass infantry army in position warfare. Within these terms they worked out the details carefully and competently, but they too rarely looked up from the work at hand to question the terms. Not until the mass infantry army of Poland was shattered by blitzkrieg did they acknowledge that they were working under the wrong assumptions.

It was specifically the German army’s development of blitzkrieg—the new doctrine, organization, and materiel built around the mobility provided by the internal combustion engine—that makes the US Army of the Depression look so bad. Surely the “stab in the back”—real or imagined—of 1918, the Versailles Treaty restrictions, and the chaos of postwar Germany might have induced the German military to stagnate. As the US Army would discover after its loss in Vietnam, there is no automatic “spur of defeat,” nor was the building of a new model army an easy or obvious path for the Germans.¹⁸ And yet when Adolf Hitler reintroduced conscription in 1935, the new *Wehrmacht* immediately formed three panzer divisions. Similarly, the supposedly hidebound British army formed an armored division in 1937, while the infantry-oriented French army had created two mechanized divisions and built over 2000 tanks by 1939. The US Army took an additional year to form two armored divisions, and a year and a half more to equip them for combat.

Martin Blumenson writes in *The Patton Papers*, “An isolationist Congress, niggardly with funds, had deprived the Army of the means with which to develop large numbers of tanks, support artillery, trucks, close-support planes, and other new weapons and pieces of equipment, together with the units to use them.”¹⁹ That of course is true in part, and is the standard explanation of the often bitter Regular survivors of the Depression years. And yet each of the specific items that Blumenson lists was not developed for other reasons besides funding, reasons internal to the Army and under Army control. Other armies, also beggared by the Depression, overcame some of

the same problems and made more progress toward modernization. Blumen-son better describes the American Army when he writes that it had become too negative, too narrow, too poor "in funds and in spirit."²⁰

The Army's poverty during the Great Depression was insufficiently different from what came before and from what befell other armies to account for its failure to modernize. The Army's imagination and morale were inadequate and its priorities were misdirected, and so it failed until well after the Depression to create the basis for the Army of World War II. Solid mobilization planning, a competent Regular cadre, and the customary American blessings of time, space, and allies allowed the Army to recover and to field modern, powerful ground and air forces that won great victories. For its earlier lack of vision, however, a lack of funds is no excuse.

NOTES

1. Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar* (New York: McKay, 1966), p. 301. This was important, but not in the way that it seems. The rifle had been replaced by the machine gun as the dominant weapon of the infantry during the World War. The US Army's continued concern over rifles and its delay in producing them were both symptomatic of its interwar problems.

2. The Depression years for the Army were fiscal years 1931 to 1939. Fiscal years 1932 to 1935 were the worst.

3. Mark S. Watson, *Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations* (Washington: GPO, 1950), pp. 4, 15, and 24.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

5. Theodore Ropp, *War in the Modern World*, rev. ed. (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 259, 309-13.

6. D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), I, 448-61. See also Constance McLaughlin Green, et al., *The Ordnance Department: Planning Munitions for War* (Washington: GPO, 1955), p. 41; Irving B. Holley, Jr., *Buying Aircraft: Procurement for the Army Air Forces* (Washington: GPO, 1964), p. 21; and War Department, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1935* (Washington: GPO, 1936). (Hereinafter, these annual reports will be cited as *Annual Report*, followed by the year.)

7. Green, pp. 169ff, 186ff.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 204ff.

9. Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), p. 402; and Watson, p. 24. See also *Annual Report*, 1930, 1931.

10. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1952), pp. 7-9.

11. During the period 9 February to 1 June 1934, when government contracts with commercial airlines were suspended, the US Army Air Corps was given responsibility for flying the mail. Serious problems with organization, infrastructure, equipment, weather forecasting, and pilot training and experience became immediately apparent. Several aircraft accidents and pilot fatalities occurred while the corps struggled to shoulder this massive burden. See Maurer Maurer, *Aviation in the U.S. Army, 1919-1939* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1987), chap. 17.

12. Henry H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper, 1949), pp. 113ff.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

14. Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), VI, 13.

15. *Annual Report*, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937.

16. *Annual Report*, 1933, 1934.

17. Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General, 1880-1939* (New York: Viking, 1963), I, 311.

18. Ropp, pp. 294-302. See also Robert J. O'Neil, "Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1919-1939," in *The Theory and Practice of War*, ed. Michael Howard (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 143-65.

19. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers, 1885-1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 949.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 856.