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Whence the Big Battalions?

F. J. CHIAVENTONE

"I should very much like to deliver a dissertation on the American army and the possibilities of its extension. You see, it is such a beautiful little army, and the dear people don't quite understand what to do with it."

Rudyard Kipling
American Notes, 1930

God," Napoleon is reputed to have remarked, "is on the side of the big battalions!" He was referring to the massive conventional armies he had assembled at the end of the 18th century in his bid for dominance of the European continent. To the Emperor's chagrin, the combined battalions of the allied powers were bigger and ultimately more effective. The concept of armed coalitions which effectively undid Napoleon has, in the latter half of the 20th century, played a far more complex and delicate role in the maintenance of the European balance of power. For more than 40 years now, NATO and the Warsaw Pact have faced each other in a breathless and uneasy stand-off in a Europe much changed from the one Napoleon knew in an earlier century. These huge conventional armies of tanks, guns, and men are about to experience a change of monumental implications.

Valued as much for their deterrent as their warfighting capabilities, these armor-intensive big battalions have nonetheless been instrumental as guarantors of the prolonged period of peace which has characterized Europe in the postwar era. It is an era that is coming to a close in a remarkable and largely unanticipated wave of euphoria whose harbingers were an equally remarkable vocabulary of detente, *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and Gorbymania. In a world in which statesmanship, diplomacy, and economic necessity are increasingly successful in ameliorating tensions between the superpowers, have the big battalions, by their very success, rendered themselves obsolete? Or is this comforting perception simply a product of old-fashioned "linear"

thinking, due to be exposed and overturned by that “paradoxical logic of strategy” advanced recently by Edward Luttwak?¹

Our century has seen the dawn of the Nuclear Age. For a while thereafter, the big battalions were displaced by the big bang. The massed armies that traversed the Continent in two world wars were replaced by small groups of technicians, with unprecedented destructive power at their fingertips. But the specter of a nuclear Damoclean sword dangling above the whole of Western civilization proved too grim for even the most hardened of cold warriors. The strident rhetoric of massive retaliation was gradually replaced by the more measured tones of flexible response. Strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces were balanced by conventional forces (preeminently ground combat troops), and Europe settled into a protracted, albeit massively armed, peace.

While NATO has for years depended heavily on the threat of nuclear retaliation to offset its inferiorities in conventional force levels vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact, European leaders are today less willing to pay the political freight associated with a strategy that stakes the very existence of the Continent on a potential roll of the nuclear die. Thus in recent years NATO has come more and more to rely upon the presence of strong ground combat troops to maintain the balance of power, demonstrate its solidarity and resolve, and deter Warsaw Pact aggression. This evolving strategy appears to have worked—45 years of peace, however uneasy, are still 45 years of peace. Yet the economic costs have been high. Conventional forces, tanks, guns, and most especially men do not come cheaply. Now, Europe once again is changing. Frontier fences are coming down. East bloc economies and politics are thrashing about in the throes of internal chaos. Germans, West and East, have danced on the Berlin Wall and rent it asunder. The vaunted Soviet army has been described by the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee as essentially “dismembered.”² The Warsaw Pact is disintegrating. The threat would appear to be evaporating before our very eyes.

As a result, influential players in the national security process are asking hard questions about the utility of current force structures. The primary question ought to be: How do we adjust our force structure to best account

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for the political changes transpiring on the world scene? But one no longer entertains real hopes that this question will be answered by any rational calculus. The bandwagon of force reductions is now careening downhill, and leaders from across the political spectrum are leaping aboard. The question is thus no longer whether to cut or when to cut or even how much to cut. The question indeed is whether to retain any big battalions at all.

To many in Europe and the United States, a whole new world of economic opportunities is opening up. These opportunities, however, will require an immense expenditure of capital. One can easily imagine a European Common Market where defense, weighed against the realities of market pressures, assumes significantly lower priority—or is given short shrift altogether. Much of the capital now devoted to defense will be seen as having more utility in people-oriented programs. The peace-dividend debate is not a uniquely American phenomenon.

What of the American heavy divisions now standing watch over borders which, to many Europeans, have all but lost their significance? How long will Congress and the American public willingly support the maintenance of some 220,000 American troops doing a job that the Europeans themselves have come to view as superfluous? It seems inevitable, as President Bush has publicly proclaimed, that the American presence in Europe will undergo a change—and that in the very near future.³ There is little doubt as to what that change will entail: a significant drawdown of our forward-based units in that theater.

In the face of troublesome trade and budget deficits and increasingly fierce economic competition in both Europe and Asia, the prospect of reduced military expenditures holds a hypnotically seductive appeal for many of our legislators. While procurement of large-ticket weapon systems would appear to provide a lucrative and likely target, appropriations earmarked for such items tend to be expended over long terms and dispersed widely over congressional constituencies. Thus, “perceived” savings there are relatively insignificant when viewed against the comparatively larger and quicker savings to

be had from immediate cuts in personnel payroll and force operating expenses. This means that the budget ax will fall on the most funding-intensive element of the Department of Defense—manpower. The Army, which has the largest manpower requirements, will be especially vulnerable.

For the Army, large-scale reductions are thus inevitable. But faced with a requirement to make drastic manpower cuts, what and whom will the Army choose to do without? What will the Army look like in ten years? Will it be a lean fighting tool, all teeth and claws? Or will it more closely resemble Germany's 100,000-man army of the years following World War I? The latter, while relatively small, was a finely-wrought cadre of that nation's finest military professionals, thinkers, and trainers, carefully chosen and nurtured to allow for rapid expansion. In time this cadre force formed the backbone of the fabled *Wehrmacht*, which came close to bringing Europe to its knees.

If we choose a cadre-style Army, in the German model, it would maintain a small, light, combat-ready corps capable of short-notice deployments to deal with low-intensity conflict situations such as the Dominican Republic, Grenada, or Panama, but would put the bulk of its resources into research and development, intelligence, reserve force enhancement, maintenance of mobilization base, sustainment functions, and the education, training, and development of commissioned and noncommissioned officers. With any luck at all this should give us the capability to deal adequately with brush fires while still maintaining the capacity to expand heavy forces both efficiently and effectively in time of true national peril.



Abrams tanks of the 167th Armored Bn., 2d Armored Division (FWD) cross the Lachte River in Hahnhorst, West Germany, during REFORGER '87. The Division is now to be "inactivated" by 30 September 1991.

A much more likely result will be to place our faith in a teeth-and-claws force with one primary and overriding focus—what the Army refers to as “warfighting.” Consisting essentially of combat units, it would be manned almost exclusively by young, aggressive, steely-eyed fighters. Their equipment would be the best that American technology could provide. The units themselves would be flexible, mobile, and capable of immediate response to any crisis. Tax dollars expended would go toward a purely combat-oriented force structure, mostly light, with lots of firepower and instantly available strategic airlift. In other words, we would have the expeditionary army advocated by Major Daniel Bolger in his recent and much-remarked *Parameters* article, “Two Armies.”⁴ Elegant in its simplicity, inexpensive in execution, such an Army is tailor-made for political campaign rhetoric. It is, in short, a concept that can be expected to do quite well in Congress.

But is a teeth-and-claws expeditionary Army concept based on anything more substantial than a general feeling of optimism about recent political developments (and assumed trends) in Eastern Europe and the consequent conclusion that all future wars will be limited to short-term, low-intensity conflict scenarios where fast and violent execution will inevitably preclude a need for long-term sustainability? Is not acceptance of such a concept actually a rosy proclamation that henceforth the United States will be exempted from the scourge of having to commit big battalions to the brutal business of prolonged conventional war? And will such a concept withstand the tests of time and historical reality? Certainly the concept is long on romantic and fiscal appeal. In his “Two Armies” essay, Major Bolger was clever to quote Frenchman Jean Larteguy on the virtues of expeditionary soldiers. Yet the more ominous pronouncements of an earlier Frenchman, Marshal Joseph Joffre, also warrant consideration. It was, after all, Joffre who trained and fielded the World War I army of “young enthusiasts” who, in his words, knew “no other law than that of the offensive.” It was Joffre who insisted that all attacks were to be “pushed to the extreme with the firm resolution to charge the enemy with the bayonet, in order to destroy him.” Joffre and his contemporaries assumed that their war too would be a short one, with sustainment obviated by the *élan* of the French soldier and the spirit of the bayonet.⁵

Leaders to fight our future wars are assuredly the most perishable of commodities. Tanks and guns, assuming that research and development and a viable industrial base are preserved, may with luck and time be regenerated. Military experience, however, is a far less readily renewable resource. Thus the gravest peril of the impending demise of the big battalions is not that of fading organizations, or equipment, or even facilities, but of brainpower. It is inevitable that as organizations evaporate, so too will a substantial part of the officer and noncommissioned officer corps. It is equally likely that among the many who are

managed out of existence as mere ciphers will be the latter-day counterparts of Dwight Eisenhower, George C. Marshall, and Omar Bradley—the architects of Allied victory in the Second World War. This is not to say that the work of these officers in the 1920s and 1930s was necessarily a prerequisite for their performance in the 1940s, but rather that preservation of the cadre and training system and the survival of these officers in it were essential factors. However great or urgent the need, no amount of industrial surge will produce the gifted theoreticians, strategists, and field commanders who are lost through the haste and neglect of a shortsighted drawdown.

While there is no shortage of those who now prophesy a future of sunshine and roses in Europe and the Eastern bloc, it would be well to remember the bleaker times a short two years ago. That which has so recently occurred in Europe and the Eastern bloc has, in fact, confounded all the so-called experts. Political developments unthinkable two years ago are now a reality. In times of such rapid and overwhelming change, who is to predict with certainty what the chaotic future may hold? A great many “experts,” politicians and editorialists particularly, are already proclaiming that war in Europe is impossible. We would do well to remember that many of these same pundits were gleefully proclaiming the end of the Chinese communist government right up to the moments before the horror of Tiananmen Square.

It may truly be time to bid farewell to the big battalions and the men who have shaped and led them. It may truly be that they are out of fashion. We should not, however, delude ourselves into thinking that whatever course we choose to pursue will be less problematic than the course we trod in the past, or less fraught with potentially catastrophic consequences. The decisions that are eventually made, whether they provide for an expeditionary army, a cadre army, or perhaps something in between, should not be made lightly, with unseemly exultation, untoward certitude, and unrealistic expectations. As peace breaks out in Europe, let our euphoria be tempered by sober reflection on the uncertain permutations of an unfathomable future. Should the impossible or the unthinkable occur, the nation may survive or perish based on the choices we are about to make. Let us all hope that those decisions are made with farseeing wisdom.

NOTES

1. Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987).
2. Senator John Warner in an address to the American Defense Preparedness Association, quoted in *Defense Daily*, 21 March 1990, p. 444.
3. See, e.g., Ann Devroy, “Bush Calls for Major Review of NATO’s Policies,” *The Washington Post*, 4 May 1990, pp. A1, A23.
4. Daniel P. Bolger, “Two Armies,” *Parameters*, 19 (September 1989), 24-34.
5. John Ellis, *Eye-Deep In Hell* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 84.