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Heavy Peace

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Peace is expensive. When the peace is our own, no expense is too high. Peace is the cradle of our greatness. Although we Americans freed ourselves through war, we formed ourselves in peace. But when the peace is the peace of others, far from our shores and faint in its relevance, cost matters. Usually, the financial price is minor compared to other national expenditures. But the cost to our military establishment, already slimmed to fragility and poorly structured for missions short of war, can be exorbitant.

It is a calculus our military feels, but fails to adequately understand and explain. The world we knew is gone, replaced by ferment, confusion, and contradiction, and no comprehensible global order is likely to reemerge in our lifetimes. In this age of opportunity and danger, our military clings to traditional solutions based upon a romantic and superficial reading of history. We praise a past we do not understand, imagining rare virtues where there were only struggling human beings like ourselves. The reality of America's military past was too often one of institutional mediocrity redeemed by wealth, courage, and blood.

That mediocrity is again apparent in our approach to new technologies and consequent institutional change. Instead of exploring the possibility that new technologies might change the way we organize for war and conflict, we limit ourselves to the selection of technologies that allow us to improve traditional organizations. Our military is accumulative, not innovative. We graft laser designators onto muskets. It is as if America's surgeons were to insist that yesteryear's operating techniques remain indisputably the best, and that, although they welcome sharper scalpels, all further innovation would imperil the health care system. In this era of American triumph, only two major American institutions continue to resist the future: blue-collar unions and our armed forces. The unions have a better case.

The mathematics of readiness have altered radically, but we have not deciphered the new formula. The deployment of a reinforced brigade cripples multiple corps. Instead of reforming dysfunctional structures, the Pentagon tries to avoid missions, with little regard for differentiation between their importance. Thus, our national leadership sees the military as stubborn and willful, when our generals and admirals are, in fact, bewildered.

This situation will worsen.

Although history is littered with treaties cobbled together from ill-matched parts, marking pauses between rounds of violence and not true peace, the forms of "peace" have rarely, if ever, been as various and uncertain as they are today. The subsequent Cold War notwithstanding, World War II ended in exultant clarity. We knew who won, and the losers knew, unmistakably, that they had lost and must submit. Then came Korea, with notions of modulation and fantasies of diplomatic nuance alien to our national soul. Korea made Vietnam inevitable. Meanwhile, a sliver of Asia has enchained American troops and policy for nearly half a century. We may unreservedly support South Korea while nonetheless asking if the peace on the 38th Parallel was well wrought.

Still, the times were such that Korea was our fight. Our involvement in Indochina, too, made strategic sense--it was the execution that was botched, at every level above tactical combat. But while we focused on the final manifestation of our century's contest between good and evil--and it was no less than that--another face of conflict reemerged all around us, sculpted by unleashed desires and ineradicable hatreds.

The "little" conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, erupting while America was otherwise engaged or licking its wounds,

established the new paradigm. From the Congo to Cyprus, from Northern Ireland to the Indian subcontinent, the best peace was uneasy, and the rest had to be enforced and then guarded. Focused mightily on the Soviet Union--and ever fearful of another Vietnam--the American military looked away as nations decayed and slaughters spread. Our peacekeeping deployments were treated as exceptions, aberrations. We died in Beirut, uncomprehending to the last, but stayed in the Sinai. We descended on impoverished islands like tourists with guns, and soon went home as tourists do.

Then came the 1990s. Somalia. Haiti, poorest of the poor. Macedonia. Rwanda and eastern Zaire. Bosnia. After the squandered triumph of Desert Storm, we lingered in the Persian Gulf, watching as the dictator we spared tormented his people and played peek-a-boo with the UN surrogates we supported only with a hollow presence and hollow rhetoric. On a lesser scale, we sent observers to Cambodia and Abkhazia, and to the contested border between Ecuador and Peru. Of all these problems, only Haiti directly affected the United States--because of a wave of desperate migrants whose longings shamed and worried us--and only our Gulf engagement had an economic rationale. The rest were Cabinet conflicts in which we deployed because diplomats and their camp followers persuaded the President that engagement was either in our political interests or a moral requirement. But our military went, as it will go again and again. Meanwhile, the average American could not readily locate a single one of these territories on a map--and, frankly, he or she is none the poorer for it.

We live in an age of "heavy peace." What passes for peace now might be a temporary exhaustion of warring parties, or a clever move by one side to buy time, or a new status quo that no one will admit. Each demands military observers and, increasingly, troops to guarantee the peace that blood has made.

The Department of Defense has deceived itself, hiding from the truth, and then, in the case of Bosnia, it deceived Congress, for motives still obscure. Bosnia's peace is one of mutual unhappiness, of corruption and stagnation, in which even those who do not want a renewal of conflict would be swept along by a sense of inevitability, were our troops to leave today. For the Serbs, unhappy and unsated, the situation is akin to Trotsky's "Neither peace nor war." For the Bosnians, it is a chance to build an army while living on charity, and the provisional temper of the Dayton Accords allows the Sarajevo government to postpone all difficult choices. The Croats are consolidating gains that were disallowed by the spirit, though not the reality, of the Dayton Accords. And we have convinced the warring parties that our military's presence is essential to their peace. Nonetheless, in 1996, an election year, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the elected representatives of the American people that our troops would be home by Christmas--while, in the Pentagon, the contours of a follow-on force were already under discussion. We may be in Bosnia as long as UN elements have been on Cyprus--for a generation.

A border away, we insist that the question of Kosovo will not be answered by US ground forces. That claim may prove to be correct. But there will be other Kosovos, and, whether for strategic or humanitarian reasons--or just muddled impulses--we will not be able to resist them all. I do not seek to judge morality or human obligation here (I am myself as uneasy with inaction as with action). This essay seeks only to highlight the price our military is paying and will continue to pay, with interest.

We cannot enter upon such commitments under the assumption that they will be temporary and brief. Some may last only a few months (or the day it takes to evacuate US citizens). But in this troubled, hate-filled era, we will witness more civil wars, more state and regional dissolutions, more fragmented borders, and more factional strife than our consciences will be able to absorb or our military able to cover. Presidents, frustrated or inspired, will send our military to address some of these problems, if only because the military is usually the only tool left on the shelf (and always the most impressive). The next century will, indeed, be an American century, but it will be a century of difficult American choices, and it is unlikely that we will always choose wisely. Military readiness is essential--but the military must be ready for reality, not for its fantasy war.

We tolerate a self-deluded, "no-mores" military--as in no more Vietnams, no more Task Force Smiths, no more hollow forces, no more sexual harassment, and now, no more Bosnias. We might as well attempt to solve the crime problem by declaring that there will be no more crime. It is useful to learn from your mistakes, but abject foolishness to define yourself by them. And no matter how loudly we shout these negative battle cries, the willingness of Americans, or at least of their elected leadership, to intervene is loosely cyclical--just eccentric enough to prevent forecasting--and it is

not dependent on military readiness or willingness.

Sometimes, indeed, our military will get lucky and avoid undesired commitments. I am only afraid that it will at the wrong times. The Pentagon is much more apt to acquiesce to minor efforts that do not much matter than to major involvements that make a strategic difference, or that prevent a significant regional threat from emerging. Our national tendency is to delay doing the inevitable until the cost soars.

One way or another, we will go. Deployments often will be unpredictable, often surprising. And we frequently will be unprepared for the mission, partly because of the sudden force of circumstance but also because our military is determined to be unprepared for missions it does not want, as if the lack of preparedness might prevent our going. We are like children who refuse to get dressed for school.

Yet in an age when those who make our national decisions have not served in uniform and do not understand either the technical or human dimensions of military operations, our forces consistently look capable in ways they are not--and too expensive and powerful to be left on display when the President is out of options and key interest groups or foreign leaders are clamoring for American action. We are going to go to school, whether or not we have learned our lessons.

To be fair, this problem transcends the military sphere. The US armed forces are the victims of a world that won't hold still--a bloody, hate-drunk world that refuses to make sense to those charged by election or appointment to determine America's role in it. Perhaps the saddest loss of our time is the destruction of the Liberal myth of innate human goodness. That myth was noble, if naive. Yet, before its destruction, that myth shaped the generation that dominates Washington today, a blessed generation untouched by physical danger, and the policies they attempt continue to reject all evidence of man's fallibility. It is the inevitable disarray of those policies that leads both to the frequent use and the frequent misuse of our military.

It is hard to watch the stumbling of those men and women who imagined--or continue to imagine--that a "peaceable kingdom" might descend upon this globe. They are reduced to what we might christen a Charles Dickens foreign policy. Like the feckless Mr. Micawber in the novel *David Copperfield*, they simply keep hoping that something will turn up.

In this era of heavy peace, the United States does not really have a foreign policy, only a shifting array of prejudices and infatuations, habits and hopes. And the grim truth is that we may never have an integrated foreign policy again, no matter who sits in the Oval Office or which party sets the terms of government. While we may reasonably expect a more mature grasp of international reality from a future administration, the world may have grown too complex for a classic, "unified field" foreign policy in the style of a Metternich, Bismark, or Kissinger. One size no longer fits all--consider how swiftly the Clinton Administration's "universal" support for democracy and human rights broke down, defeated by trade priorities and global economics, by strategic calculations and cronyism (our government has not made a peep about human rights or democracy in Saudi Arabia, for instance), and even by the Administration's ludicrous, destructive infatuation with a vision of Russia that has nothing to do with Russian reality.

At the risk of using a technoid cliché, our traditional hierarchical, pin-striped image of foreign policy is giving way to interactions webbed in a complex-adaptive system. Our foreign policy establishment no longer shapes the world, but responds to it, too often in confusion and haste. Our difficulties arise because we have not recognized the profound nature of change. We keep longing and striving to do things the old way. At present, the best-integrated of our multiple foreign policies are those crafted by the Secretary of the Treasury and the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, while the Secretary of State plays on the margins. Even our media have a vastly greater effect on the world than does Foggy Bottom. Yet, the Department of State will not change without a fight. And that fight will be waged with our military forces, in broken countries and in hopeless foreign streets.

The future will not depend upon which mission a coy military condescends to accept, but upon those missions--often intractable--that will be thrust upon it. Ours is a disproportionately small force relative to its requirements, yet disproportionately expensive relative to its capabilities. It is small in its one-deep (sometimes none-deep) ranks of special skills and painfully short of human capital in general, and it possesses ever less flexibility and staying power. It is expensive because we buy the wrong systems with such enthusiasm. We prepare for our ideal missions, while the

real missions must be improvised at great expense to readiness, unit integrity, and the quality of life of our service members.

Although the thought grates in the face of current wastefulness in the realm of procurement, our defense budget is too small. Yet, recent increases may hurt rather than help. While a very real personnel crisis continues to deepen, the military refuses to make hard organizational and acquisition choices. It is likely that only Congress has the capability to force change at this point--yet Congress bears much of the blame for the current situation, as the Hill continues to favor defense procurement over military personnel and meaningful reform. The soldier will always be the subject of patriotic rhetoric, but he or she is rarely the object of enduring concern. The soldier contributes blood to military campaigns, not dollars to political campaigns or bounteous contracts to voting districts, and that will forever be his or her undoing. To a lurid extent, our military has turned into a business endeavor, and its business is not readiness.

So when we deploy a force to patrol ethnic or religious divisions--this heavy peace that weighs upon our times--the drain upon troop strength, and the stress upon a criminally austere supply and maintenance system that must support fickle, over-engineered military technologies, is crippling. One middling deployment rules out any possibility of responding to two major regional contingencies and constricts our ability to mount one full-blown expeditionary effort in a timely manner.

Yet, if these peacekeeping and peacemaking, policing and observing missions cancer our readiness, it is because we have done nothing practical to fight the cancer. We fight against the missions, instead of facing the shortcomings inherent in a force that has contracted, but has not changed with the times. There is no adjective harsh enough for a bureaucracy that places legacy systems and legacy organizations above the recruiting, training, welfare, and numerical adequacy of the men and women in uniform. While we continue to need heavy forces, their current configuration is fit for a museum, not for our likely missions. And most of our operational requirements for the coming decades will be for adequate numbers of well-trained, smart, fit, and psychologically robust soldiers. How can we fail to recognize the absurdity of a situation in which the most expensive military in history is chronically short of people?

In the 1980s, the US Army fell in love with a dumbed-down version of the "culminating point," a sort of coloring-book approach to Clausewitz. Clausewitz was often quoted, but generally unread. In the original text, the explanation of how an army reaches its culminating point describes campaigns in which, as the army advances, it sheds numbers to man garrisons and guard its lines of communication. Eventually, as it progresses deeper into hostile territory, the attacking army becomes so weakened by its successes--by the requirement to leave ever more forces in its wake--that it loses both adequate mass and decisive momentum. The enemy has grown stronger not in absolute, but in relative terms. That is the culminating point.

While dreary wargames spawn imprecise discussions of tactical or operational culminating points, the US armed forces, and especially our Army, are on the way to a strategic culminating point--without even fighting a war. If we do not reverse negative personnel trends and expand our practical forces, we will be so pared down by noncritical commitments over the coming years that we will defeat ourselves. Again, this is not an argument against executing the missions--we have no choice when the President orders us to go--rather, it is an argument against dismissing the strategic reality in favor of our professional desires.

Numbers matter. And we don't have them. Even the systems we plan to buy come in ever smaller numbers, as their cost, specificity, and complexity increase. Lobbyists and retired generals employed by defense contractors argue that it takes a decade or more to bring a new system into the force and that we cannot delay. But how long do they think it takes to build competent officers, warrants, or NCOs? Who will do the commanding, planning, training, and mission execution that employs our outrageously expensive, slightly improved systems? And who will walk the foreign streets and patrol the back roads where those systems are useless?

It bears repeating that the conflicts of the coming century will be human conflicts, and that these will require a human response. Even in Iraq, where the fruits of victory turned out to be an elaborate game of hide and seek (except for the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs, for whom our victory meant ill-placed hope, then massacre), our best technologies were inadequate to ferret out a dictator's deadly secrets. While proponents of airpower claim it can accomplish every military mission by itself, infantrymen keep the muddy watch in the Balkans. Technology is seductive, but frequently

irrelevant in the clinch. This age of heavy peace is the age of the skilled, disciplined soldier (and we may hope he will be backed by a firm and wise national leadership). And it is the soldier, above all, who is in short supply.

Various proposals to reduce the burden of peace operations on our forces have been floated along the Potomac. None is convincing. Certainly, contracted civilians (usually military veterans) can do a great deal where the threat level is low and firepower is not an immediate requirement. But issues ranging from legal status to enforcement credibility limit their potential in more dangerous situations. Essentially, military contract employees can provide a fig leaf for warring parties looking for an excuse to quit fighting, but they cannot stop or prevent violence. Contract employees can also serve in "gray area" jobs in which we do not want our service members to appear. But they are not going to take over responsibility for general peacemaking and peacekeeping. They are useful tools that expand our national capability, but they cannot be allowed to veer off the rails and become private armies.

Another proposed solution, offered in various forms, involves a two-tier military establishment: ready, fully developed elite forces to fight our wars, and a secondary, cheaper, constabulary military to do the jobs the "fighters" don't want to do. Apart from the impossibility of recruiting international garbage collectors, the argument founders on cost analysis (it would not, in fact, be cheaper), inevitable jealousies, and the damage that consequent reductions in the number of combat units would do to our forces. Besides, we already have a "B-team" of less and less ready forces on active duty.

Our forces are respected as peacekeepers specifically because of the combat power that stands behind them. A secondary force, unprepared to conduct sustained combat operations, would not only prove ineffective, but unwanted internationally. UNPROFOR, the United Nations Protection Force, offers a classic example of the inefficacy of such a force. The paradox of successful peacekeeping is that it relies upon a recognized warmaking ability (as well as upon the will to employ that ability).

Lastly, some academic theoreticians have proposed saving money by hiring foreign forces--either recruiting individuals or hiring existing units--to do our dirty work for us. This is the kind of "thinking" that comes from sedentary, overnourished males who have read too much soft-core military history. First, the legal ramifications would be insoluble. Second, such forces would have neither the practical capabilities nor the moral force of US troops. Third, we would not be able to recruit or hire by unit from nations that shared our values and level of behavioral development (the Swedes aren't going to play--want some Liberian troops?). Fourth, it would drain money from our own defense and play into the hands of extreme liberals and defense contractors, both of whom would be glad to cut our military personnel accounts. Fifth, it would be politically impossible. Proponents of such nonsense picture a sort of Raj military, with loyal sepoys and tough Gurkhas doing the dirty work for our nation. But if the US government ever recruited Gurkhas, we would take away their knives and warn them never to hurt anybody. It isn't even worth going on to the arguments that nations that must rely on mercenary forces are nations in decline--the image of darker-skinned foreign hirelings enforcing America's will in ravaged countries is not one we are likely to embrace.

At the end of the day (and for countless days to come), this will leave us with unwanted missions and an ill-matched military. Although our military leadership imagines it can change the missions, it would be far easier, and ultimately more useful, to change the force to fit the times. This does not mean discarding all heavy weapons and turning soldiers into policemen, as the Pentagon's staff drones characterize all efforts to reduce our military's structural obesity. Rather, it means fielding deployable forces, concentrating on the core issue of personnel, avoiding the purchase of new systems that perpetuate our deployment difficulties, focusing research and development on innovating the weapons of the future instead of perfecting the weapons of the past, and on reforming our thought, doctrine, and training to better reflect the world as it is and will be.

But the crux of the problem is people. We must have soldiers of adequate quality in sufficient numbers, and they must be well-trained and appropriately equipped. When we think about the Army of the future, for instance, we must stop thinking from the division down and start thinking from the soldier up--the middle level of the force is the anachronistic level. We must learn to embrace the missions that are inevitable if we want to avoid the missions that are hopeless. Through our honest participation in our nation's struggle to modulate foreign crises, we must rebuild the trust our military has lost because it has insisted that rescuing poor Eliza from the ice flow inevitably leads to another Vietnam.

In this age of heavy peace, of hatred, genocide, displaced populations, and iron intolerance, our military will face enormous and repeated challenges that clash with our ideal of a military's use. We must stop pretending those challenges will disappear--that "something will turn up"--and prepare to meet them.

Ralph Peters (LTC, USA Ret.) retired from the Army so that he could write and speak freely. His commentaries on military and strategic issues have appeared in a wide range of media outlets. In March 1999 he will publish two books: "Traitor," a novel about corruption in America's defense industry; and "Fighting For The Future," a look at coming conflicts based upon his essays in *Parameters*.

Reviewed 1 March 1999. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil