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William R. Hawkins

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Imposing Peace: Total vs. Limited Wars, and the Need to Put Boots on the Ground

WILLIAM R. HAWKINS

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What distinguishes total war from limited war? Is it the scope of violence, directed not only against armies in the field but also against civilian populations? Is it the mobilization of an entire society with conscription and a war economy, a "nation in arms" which some would say justifies the expansion of violence to the entire society because a clear line cannot be drawn between those who are involved in the war effort and those who are not? Or is it the objective of the war which defines it, with a total war aimed at the destruction of the enemy regime and its possible conquest whereas a limited war seeks only to resolve a conflict that does not endanger the survival of either belligerent?

If total war is defined in the first sense as society-wide violence, then airpower is the weapon of choice. As the pioneer air strategist Giulio Douhet wrote in 1921:

No longer can areas exist in which life can be lived in safety and tranquillity, nor can the battlefield any longer be limited to actual combatants. On the contrary, the battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensive of the enemy. There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians.[1]

Critics who have attributed every lack of success in American war efforts to restrictions placed on airpower--from the failure to bomb China during the Korean War to the failure to knock out Belgrade's electrical system the first night of the Kosovo campaign--have defined these conflicts as limited wars because the level of violence was not maximized. It is far from clear, however, whether this "one hand tied behind our back" argument made repeatedly by airpower enthusiasts is valid, in that unrestricted airpower would necessarily have changed the course of the conflicts to which the argument has been applied. Take for example Beijing's intervention in the Korean War. When Mao Zedong informed Joseph Stalin that he was ordering Chinese troops into Korea in October 1950, he painted a grim picture of the expected reaction: "We must be prepared for the United States declaring and entering a state of war with China, and we must be prepared for the United States at least using its air force to bomb a good number of major cities and industrial centers in China and using its navy to assault coastal regions." [2]

Mao, however, felt that this would not determine the outcome of the war. Instead, the outcome would turn on the ability of the Chinese army to drive the US-led United Nations army out of Korea. This accomplished, the US air and naval attacks would "probably not be on a broad scale nor last long" because the war would have been resolved on the ground and American forces would lack the strength to mount a new invasion of the peninsula.

China's leader was thinking in terms of the other definition of total war given above, the destruction of the enemy regime and the conquest of its territory being necessary to bring the war to a favorable end. While Beijing was well aware of its technological inferiority, not only in the air but also on the ground (Mao mentioned the preponderance of American artillery), its military strategists felt that its concept of a final victory was attainable by the means available.

Today, the United States has some unparalleled military capabilities. It is the only nation in the world able to conduct large-scale military operations far beyond its borders. In the wake of "100-hour ground wars" and "over the horizon"

precision strikes, both civilian and uniformed officials are making claims that border on hubris. Yet their claims have not always turned into a cheap and easy victory, or, more important, an enduring peace. The problem is not a lack of means, but a lack of strategy.

The American predicament at the end of the 20th century resembles that of Republican Rome in the 2d century B.C. As one historian of the ancient world has described the situation, "Moderation had been the keynote of Rome's traditional foreign policy, and as a result there was hardly one of her defeated enemies whom she was not obliged to fight at least a second time. The opinion was gaining ground that Rome had been too generous in the past." [3] Rome then changed its strategy from limited to total war, destroying both Carthage in North Africa and Corinth in Greece, and placing their lands under the rule of friendly regimes. Centuries of peace in those regions followed.

Today, Saddam Hussein is still in power in Iraq. Having run the UN weapon inspectors out of the country, his regime is again working on biological and chemical weapons and the missiles to launch them. One of the reasons given for not marching on Baghdad in 1991 was that the United States did not want to get bogged down in Iraq. Those who worried about a protracted involvement rebuilding a post-Saddam Iraq did not foresee that eight years later American warplanes would still be periodically bombing the country.

Slobodan Milosevic is still in power in Serbia, though because that country has a less oppressive system of government than Iraq, he may be forced out of office. If, however, Milosevic is deposed because he failed to protect Serbian territory or the safety of Serbs living in other parts of what was once Yugoslavia, his successor may be another nationalist hostile to the West. Because of this continued Serbian militancy, the United States is keeping the equivalent of an Army division in the Balkans for an indefinite period, divided between Bosnia and Kosovo.

Iraq and Kosovo showcased American military superiority, but revealed a lack of strategy as formulated by Carl von Clausewitz. As Raymond Aron interpreted the great German strategist, "If strategy has one end, it could be summarized in a single word: peace. The end of strategy or of the conduct of the war is peace, not military victory, even though each of the belligerents wants a different peace or conceives of peace in different terms." [4]

This kind of peace requires fundamental political change to be stable. The winning belligerent must not just impose, but establish his version of peace by ensuring that the losing belligerent has abandoned any competing concept. In contrast, peacekeeping is not peace; rather, it is proof that the war is not really over. This is because the enemy remains in power to fight another day. Clausewitz fought in the Napoleonic Wars. That two-decade struggle produced great victories on all sides, but only after Napoleon was deposed was there peace.

The United States seemed to understand this in World War II when President Franklin Roosevelt declared a strategy of "unconditional surrender" and "the destruction of the philosophies in those countries which are based on conquest and the subjugation of other people." This meant the removal of the Axis regimes and their replacement with democratic governments. It would have been unthinkable to stop at the German border after the liberation of France, leaving Adolf Hitler in Berlin.

Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans after the fall of Rome; Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker. Emperor Hirohito was spared, but General Tojo was hanged. Denazification programs, war crimes trials, purges of collaborators, and the writing of new constitutions cemented liberal governments in office. These new democracies soon joined the United States as allies. Western Europe settled into the longest period of peace in its history.

Yet, even during World War II, American military strategy sometimes overlooked the value of seizing foreign capitals and establishing friendly governments in them. When the people of Paris revolted against the German-Vichy regime in 1944, the approaching American army did not want to go to their aid for fear of getting bogged down in city fighting. General Dwight Eisenhower wanted to bypass Paris and stay in hot pursuit of the retreating Wehrmacht. Yet, much of the French resistance was composed of communists, and there was a danger that a liberated Paris would still not be in friendly hands. Charles de Gaulle understood the importance of who would rule in Paris to the future of postwar France and ordered one of his Free French divisions to occupy as well as help capture the capital.

There has been a long debate over the failure of the United States to drive hard on Berlin to beat the Soviets to the

city. Eighteen days before the Soviets reached Berlin, the US Ninth Army established a bridgehead across the Elbe, 50 miles from the German capital. They were not ordered forward. Instead, US troops spent their time mopping up resistance west of the Elbe, the river becoming the dividing line between US and Russian operations. General Omar Bradley considered Berlin merely a "prestige objective" that was not worth the extra casualties to capture. Bradley admitted later in his memoirs that he had "naively" dismissed British desires to "complicate the war with political foresight and non-military objectives." [5]

A similar situation faced General George Patton's Third Army in Czechoslovakia. On the day the war ended, Patton's troops were in a position to drive on Prague in force. Czech democratic leaders and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called for such an advance, but the order was not given. In fairness to Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton, they did not receive any political guidance from higher authority in Washington to design their military plans with postwar political objectives in mind.

Churchill protested this lack of thought to no avail. His interpretation of the Yalta discussions on zones of occupation was that "Berlin, Prague, and Vienna could be taken by whoever got there first." The debate over how Germany might have been divided or governed differently had the Western Allies captured Berlin will go on forever, but it is clear that the failure to send US troops deeper into Czechoslovakia and keep them there condemned that country to four decades of communist rule.

World War II also saw the first signs of a strategic choice in force structure that would bedevil the military pursuit of political objectives throughout the postwar era. In 1943, even before the invasion of France or the Philippines, the decision was made to limit the Army to 90 divisions. The savings from canceling over half the divisions planned in 1941 was to go to expanding the heavy bomber force, which would not only need manpower and industrial capacity to be built, but shipping space to be deployed and sustained.

General George Marshall argued, "The air-arm should be our most effective weapon in bringing home to the German people and the German army the futility of continued resistance." [6] Clearly, the notion that air strikes can break the will of the enemy is as old as the biplane, but it has yet to be proven even in the day of stealth fighters and cruise missiles. Fifty thousand American airmen lost their lives trying to prove the point in World War II, while Army divisions marching into Germany found themselves spread thin and perilously understrength in both combat and support troops.

In contrast, the Soviets aimed their military at political targets. They took heavy casualties against determined resistance to capture Berlin and Budapest. But they halted outside Warsaw as the Germans crushed a nationalist revolt that would have complicated Soviet control of Poland. They did not declare war on Bulgaria until 5 September 1944. The Bulgarians were already in revolt against the Germans, but the Red Army swept away the government and installed a communist regime. As Stalin told Milovan Djilas, the USSR would impose its own social system as far as its armies could march.

Throughout the Cold War, Moscow's strategy, whether pursued by military intervention, coup d'etat, or revolutionary struggle, was always aimed at installing friendly regimes that would govern new territories within the Soviet sphere. From Poland to Angola, Nicaragua to Afghanistan, its aim was always total victory. Its strategy was thus quite traditional. Its failure stemmed from the fact that the communist social system Moscow installed was inherently flawed and unsustainable, eventually even collapsing in the Soviet Union itself. This is in stark contrast to the system of democracy and capitalism which has been spread by Western influence.

The United States seemed to have adopted the total war strategy in Korea when the decision was made to advance to the Yalu to unite the peninsula under the pro-Western Seoul regime. The Chinese, however, drove the UN army out of North Korea, and President Harry Truman was not willing to escalate. Thus was born the strategy of "limited war" based on military stalemate and negotiated settlements--which is why another of the US Army's handful of divisions is still tied down in South Korea half a century later. The militancy of the Pyongyang regime remains undiminished as it develops missiles that could reach America.

North Korea has used the specter of a "death ride" to save its failed state, extorting aid and a lifting of sanctions from the United States. Other rogue regimes are developing missiles and weapons of mass destruction to deny the use of

ports and airheads to US forces by threatening to attack cooperative local states. As longer-range systems proliferate, America itself will be targeted to deter the deployment of what these hostile regimes know is still the ultimate weapon of war: a squad of infantry that can kick in the door of the presidential palace, haul down its flag, and hoist the Stars and Stripes in its place.

Through its own strategy, the United States has too often deterred itself. After the Korean War, the Eisenhower Administration downplayed conventional warfare in favor of massive retaliation based on nuclear weapons. This shift was codified in 1953. A memorandum from the civilian service Secretaries to the Joint Chiefs stressed "the need for greater reliance upon our allies for the provision of indigenous forces, particularly ground forces, in countering local communist aggressions, with greater stress upon our atomic capability as our major contribution to the needs of collective security." [7] The increased firepower of nuclear weapons would allow a reduction in conventional forces and in defense expenditures by providing more bang for the buck. Even so, though the Army was reduced to 14 divisions with a million soldiers, it remained larger than the Army of today.

The reliance on nuclear weapons provoked a backlash in strategic circles after the USSR became a nuclear power. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, academic theorists embraced the concept of limited war. They saw military operations as part of the negotiating process, a "diplomacy of violence," as Thomas Schelling called it. Victory in the age-old sense was too expensive and risky to pursue. Force would be applied gradually to send a message of resolve and to persuade an adversary that victory would be too costly for him as well. The opposing political leadership would not be targeted, nor its regime destroyed, for it was needed to carry out its side of the negotiations. Escalation would go only as far as needed to convince the other side to accept mutual de-escalation. The objective of war in most cases was to be nothing more than a restoration of the status quo ante bellum.

The problem is that if force is part of negotiations between belligerents who are expected to survive the process, then adversaries may not see the contest ending at the same time as does the United States. In 1953, 1972, and 1991, the United States thought a war had ended with the signing of certain agreements. The enemy in each case saw this only as a phase of an ongoing struggle, and continued to "negotiate" with military operations, terrorism, arms races, political agitation, and other methods which are now called asymmetrical strategies, all the while looking for an opportunity to bring the war to a true end on their own terms.

If the United States sends a message that it thinks victory is too costly to pursue, can an enemy be blamed for concluding that Washington may be unwilling to pay the costs of avoiding defeat?

The practical differences between the Eisenhower massive retaliation doctrine and the "new" theory of limited war are not as great as is often portrayed. Airpower is still the method of choice, with bombers being both the preferred tool of coercion and the war-winning weapon should coercion fail. Nukes could be replaced by napalm and, later, by precision-guided bombs, but the strategy remained the same.

Limited war theory peaked in Vietnam, where 500,000 American troops were confined to a strategically defensive stance in South Vietnam, with no thought of marching on Hanoi. Instead, a costly air campaign attempted to coerce a regime whose survival was never placed in jeopardy. After 1968, air strikes were limited to interdiction missions below the 20th parallel, well away from North Vietnam's heartland and government.

President Richard Nixon renewed the strategic air campaign with a new intensity in May 1972 in response to another major North Vietnamese ground offensive into South Vietnam. It reached its pinnacle with the Christmas bombing that December. In the 1972 air campaign, the capital city of Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong were finally hit directly by B-52 heavy bombers as restrictions were lifted which had placed some high-value targets off limits. In the 1972 air assault, the United States deployed six carriers and more than 1,000 warplanes. This seemed to break the negotiating deadlock, leading directly to the Paris Accords which were signed on 27 January 1973.

This apparent victory of air power, however, proved hollow. The Hanoi regime had signed a piece of paper, but it was not fundamentally changed in composition or outlook. It remained committed to its goal of conquering the South. With American ground troops subsequently withdrawn and US aid to South Vietnam curtailed, North Vietnam was able to launch a successful ground offensive only two years after the Paris Accords. It destroyed the Saigon regime and

brought the war to a real and final end.

North Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap called this the triumph of "people's war," a form of total war aimed at the "liberation" of land and population. It defeated the "aeronaval war of destruction" waged by the United States in an effort to "subdue our people" through the use of "huge amounts of bombs and shells which they believed nothing could resist." Giap correctly ridiculed the US strategy of "limited war" for failing to consider the "moral and political unity of our people." [8]

Part of this failure of the "aeronaval" campaign as a coercive weapon was due to restrictive rules of engagement, but its failure as a means for winning the war was due to an unrealistic expectation of what airpower alone could do. Bombers are like long-range artillery. They can destroy targets and soften up an enemy's defenses by shock and attrition, but they lack the ability to exploit the opportunity created to change the political facts on the ground. In his book *Breaking the Phalanx*, US Army Lieutenant Colonel Douglas A. MacGregor writes about the air campaign over North Vietnam:

Again and again, fighter-bombers would clear away surface-to-air missiles and fortifications and lose planes and pilots doing so. But no American ground forces would move through the breach. As a result, in a few weeks, the enemy would rebuild the defenses and more American aircraft would be lost in the process of attacking them all over again. [9]

Physical infrastructure and networks of political control could be disrupted by air attack, but the enemy could always regroup, rebuild, and regain the initiative as long as he ruled the territory and its people.

Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., blamed the failure of airpower in Vietnam on its inability to attack the enemy's center of gravity. Clausewitz defined the center of gravity as "the hub of all power and movement on which everything depends . . . the point against which all energies should be directed." The top two candidates for this designation are the enemy's army and capital. As Colonel Summers argued, the United States could not effectively focus on either: "The center of gravity could not be the North Vietnamese Army because we made the conscious decision not to invade North Vietnam to seek out and destroy its armed forces. For the same reason it could not be Hanoi, the North Vietnamese capital." [10]

Unable to strike with decisive effect to end the war at its source, the American effort was reduced to a campaign of attrition measured by body counts and bomb tonnage. Unfortunately, US public opinion (another of Clausewitz's centers of gravity) was more sensitive to the costs of attrition and prolonged conflict than were Hanoi's leaders. Even so, within the limits imposed by the strategically defensive US stance, General Creighton Abrams' emphasis on control of territory was more successful than General William Westmoreland's prior emphasis on "search and destroy" operations in driving enemy forces out of South Vietnam.

War is about politics, and politics is about the governing of land and people. Enhanced sensors and precision-guided weapons may have greatly improved "search and destroy" operations, but technology is not strategy. When the smoke clears, it still takes "boots on the ground" to consolidate a victory that really matters. In that respect, two millennia of scientific progress has not made the cruise missile a more effective tool of high politics than the Roman legionnaire.

The air strategy in Kosovo looked like that used in Vietnam. Individual targets were subject to presidential approval. In the early weeks, strikes were limited to below the 44th parallel, well away from the Serbian capital and heartland. It was a campaign of gradual pressure meant to persuade, not win. It proved powerless to stop the Serbian army and police from killing thousands of Kosovars and driving most of the population out of the province. There was, however, one crucial difference. The Serbs always thought NATO would invade, despite Washington's assurances it would not. When Milosevic was indicted as a war criminal, he could not risk a march on Belgrade. With NATO troop strength building, and increased public calls for a ground invasion (particularly from the British), Milosevic made a deal to stay out of prison (and, he hoped, stay in power).

Saddam faced the same problem in 1991 with a US-led coalition army 60 miles from Baghdad. He was thus willing to agree to measures such as UN weapon inspections and the destruction of all ballistic missiles and weapons of mass

destruction. Yet, by the time Iraq signed the UN cease-fire resolution, the withdrawal of the 545,000 deployed American troops had already started. There would be no army of occupation to escort or support the UN inspectors. Iraq went to work to thwart and undermine the terms to which it had agreed at the point of a gun, as soon as the gun was put away.

In July 1992, Iraq blocked weapon inspections. After six months of futile negotiations, the United States, Britain, and France sent airstrikes at air defense sites, followed (as per gradualist limited-war theory) by cruise missile strikes at factories thought to be involved in Iraqi nuclear and chemical weapon programs. Saddam then allowed inspections to resume, but in April sent a team into Kuwait to assassinate former US President George Bush. The United States responded with a cruise missile attack on Iraqi intelligence headquarters in Baghdad.

When Iraq moved troops toward the Kuwaiti border in October 1994, the United States prepared the division-sized 1st Marine Expeditionary Force and the Army's 24th Mechanized Infantry Division for deployment and put 156,000 other troops on alert. Saddam backed down.

A turning point occurred in August 1996 when Saddam sent three Republican Guard armored divisions and his secret police into the supposed "safe haven" of the Kurds in northern Iraq. This area had also become the center for the US-backed anti-Saddam resistance movement. Yet the only protection accorded the area was its designation as a "no-fly" zone policed by American, British, and French air patrols. Again, an air-oriented strategy proved useless against troops on the ground who could control territory and rule it. The authority of Saddam's regime was expanded. In token response, the United States launched cruise missiles against air defense sites and expanded the "no-fly" zone. These actions changed nothing on the ground and even demonstrated a crack in the anti-Iraq coalition as France dropped out of the "no-fly" patrols. American strategy was confined to an irrelevant dimension. For a dictator like Saddam, nothing succeeds like success. The demonstrated emptiness of an "over the horizon" American posture invited a new confrontation.

This came the following year when Saddam suspended the UN weapon inspections in October as they were on the verge of uncovering Iraq's biological weapons program. Limited inspections were allowed while talks dragged on, and the United States and England increased their forces in the region. The United States deployed two aircraft carriers and additional land-based aircraft, including F-117 stealth fighters and B-52 and B-1 heavy bombers. The British provided additional carrier and land-based fighters. Behind this display of air power, a naval armada held hundreds of cruise missiles at the ready just over the horizon. But all this high-tech weaponry could not offset the fatal weakness of the Anglo-American posture: they deployed no ground army.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright did request contingency plans for two possible ground offensives. One proposal was for a limited assault to seize the strategic oil port of Basra; the other was a full-fledged "march on Baghdad" involving 200,000 to 250,000 American (with perhaps some British) troops. Neither idea won any support from other White House advisors. The only ground forces sent to the Gulf during the 1998 crisis were an armored brigade deployed to defend Kuwait and a single Marine Expeditionary Unit (a reinforced battalion) at sea. Saddam knew these troops posed no threat to his regime.

Instead, the threatened air campaign devolved into a tactic for bringing Saddam to the negotiating table, as in Vietnam. No wonder Iraq's neighbors were reluctant to openly support an American military strategy that offered so little prospect for changing the fundamental nature of the situation.

The crisis ended in February 1998 with the short-lived, and largely sham, memorandum of understanding signed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz allowing UN inspectors to resume their work. Six months later, events were heading for another confrontation, and the inspectors left the country for the last time in December. The US response was a few days of air attacks on suspected Iraqi weapon labs and factories, followed by continued enforcement of "no-fly" zones over northern and southern Iraq. Economic sanctions have also continued, but these have done more to divide the Western alliance and punish the Iraqi people than to remove the Iraqi dictatorship from power. And the political trend, led by the "oil-for-food" program, is in the direction of lifting sanctions.

Inspectors provided the "boots on the ground" that afforded the best chance of finding and destroying Iraq's

laboratories and workshops. But operating within a country still controlled at every level by a hostile regime, inspectors were inherently at a disadvantage. The methods that a dedicated regime in a country the size of Iraq can use to frustrate inspections are nearly limitless. The "total war" of air strikes and sanctions has failed because the strategy has remained one of limited war in terms of its objectives. Only by changing the Baghdad regime to one that embraces true cooperation can Iraq's weapon programs be brought under control.

There is no appreciation of this in the reportedly new "strategy" being drawn up by the National Security Council.[11] The NSC is still thinking in terms of limited war, even as it talks of being "prepared and willing to use all appropriate instruments of national power to influence the actions of other states and non-state actors." It demonstrates this by endorsing the reduced conventional force levels of the present posture, which has produced indecisive wars and open-ended peacekeeping operations. This is particularly evident in the shrinking Army, as ground troops are essential to the overthrow of hostile regimes and their replacement with friendly, democratic governments.

The NSC accepts that current force levels are inadequate to meet the challenge of two nearly simultaneous regional wars. Rather than call for a rebuilding effort, however, the NSC retreats from this two-war standard. Yet the continued downsizing of the heavy ground combat units needed to fight major regional wars also reduces the forces needed to capture enemy capitals. This would be further aggravated by any trend to make active Army units lighter, training and equipping them more for the policing of peace agreements than for the fighting of wars.

The NSC planning document should be seen as part of a general throwback to the theory of limited war, but applied to a much broader global landscape. What gives its authors confidence that the United States can assume the role of world policeman at an acceptable cost is a belief in the power of stand-off aerial weapons to break the will of adversaries without risking the lives of American personnel. This, in turn, is apparently based on the notion that the "diplomacy of violence" has worked. Yet, the survival of rogue regimes against which this strategy has been applied, and the perceived need to maintain substantial troops and airpower assets on their doorsteps, call the basic assumptions of this strategy into question.

The United States needs a strategy that targets hostile regimes with the objective of removing them and liberating their people for inclusion into the expanding democratic community of nations. Such a strategy will require a renewed focus on the use of ground troops to take and control territory. This means not only a larger Army, but one with increased training for urban warfare, since cities are the center of government, finance, and civil society.

To pursue such a realistic, "boots on the ground" strategy, the role of airpower will need to be shifted from Douhet-style "strategic" attacks against social and economic targets to more tailored strikes against regime and military targets in support of Army operations. Planners will have to recognize that a friendly successor regime will need intact infrastructure and a populace not embittered by indiscriminate civilian casualties. The Navy will have to give more priority to the rapid sealift of ground forces and the reorganization of the Marines to provide a sea-mobile heavy force that can not only deploy rapidly but fight inland in cooperation with Army mechanized and airmobile units.

These changes may drive up the short-term cost of conflict (though with the aim of reducing long-term costs), but they also will make military action more effective in achieving fundamental political change and establishing an enduring peace. They also should make wars less frequent. Foreign regimes will be less likely to challenge American interests if they fear for their own survival; marginal gains will not be worth the risk. And American leaders will be less likely to become embroiled in "limited" actions without first thinking through what exactly they wish to accomplish and what a true victory will require.

NOTES

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William R. Hawkins is a Visiting Fellow at the US Business and Industry Council, following five years on the staff of Representative Duncan Hunter, Chairman of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Procurement. Before going to Washington he was an economics professor at Radford University and Appalachian State University.

Reviewed 9 May 2000. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil