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# Transformation: Let's Get it Right this Time

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The lessons of Task Force Hawk and Kosovo have rung loudly in the halls of Congress and the Pentagon. However, the immense difficulty the US Army faced in deploying a capable, warfighting force to northern Albania is only symptomatic of a much larger problem that the Army has grappled with for several decades: how to develop a force light enough to get where it is needed quickly and yet lethal enough to win when it gets there. Task Force Hawk was just the most recent manifestation of this problem, demonstrating yet again that the Army is still far from a solution. In response, General Eric Shinseki, the Army's Chief of Staff, has launched the Army on a path to transform itself into a deployable force fully capable of meeting the national strategic challenges of this new century.

This is a path the Army has trod before. Unfortunately, it is strewn with dashed hopes and lost opportunities, victims of the landmines of the Army's own institutional nature. As George Santayana wrote, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it." This article, then, is a cautionary tale; its purpose is to relate the story of the Army's effort to transform itself in the 1980s in the hope that the current generation of transformers will learn to avoid these landmines by studying the failures--and successes--of their predecessors.

## Saudi Arabia, 1990

When the United States responded to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990, US forces faced the prospect of a major military defeat. Had Saddam Hussein continued to attack south, there was the very real possibility of a disaster unmatched since the lightly armed troops of Task Force Smith had been brutally overrun by North Korean armor in the opening episode of our involvement in the Korean War. At the beginning of the Gulf War, American soldiers and the success of our overall Mideast policy were placed in grave danger, not only by Saddam Hussein but also by an Army decisionmaking process that years earlier had deprived the United States of air-deployable forces capable of defeating heavy armor on Middle Eastern terrain.

When President Bush drew his famous "line in the sand" to thwart the potential advance of Iraqi forces into Saudi Arabia, the line was held for several weeks by only the lightly armed and relatively immobile 82d Airborne Division and a Marine Expeditionary Force. The airborne division--even backed by considerable air power--was no match for the heavy Iraqi armored forces poised north of the Saudi border. Had Saddam Hussein elected to invade Saudi Arabia, this light infantry force--the only type of Army force that could be rapidly deployed by air--might have been quickly overrun. This force imbalance created an extremely dangerous "window of vulnerability" that closed only when reinforcing heavy forces arrived by sea several weeks later. Until the arrival of the Army's heavy force, the deployed ground units were left to hope that Baghdad would be deterred by the possible adverse implications of directly attacking American forces. It's worth repeating: we *hoped* they would be deterred. Although this wishful deterrence worked in this instance, as former Army Chief of Staff Gordon Sullivan is fond of saying, "Hope is not a method."

Few if any of the paratroopers anxiously scanning the northern sky for the telltale dust columns of Iraqi armor advancing south knew that this window of vulnerability could have been avoided. For years the Army had been preparing to field a high-technology light division that combined the air deployability of a light infantry division with the firepower and mobility of a heavy division. It was also intentionally designed to fight heavy armored forces in the Middle East. Unfortunately, this division disappeared completely from the Army force structure in 1989, only a year before it was critically needed.

Why did this happen? An analysis of the internal Army decisionmaking involved provides a few answers--and perhaps hope of avoiding past mistakes.

### **The Strategic Situation: Iran, 1980**

The fall of the Shah of Iran and the resulting hostage crisis, followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, thrust the Persian Gulf into the spotlight of American strategic concern. Afraid that turmoil in Iran could lead to a Soviet invasion of that country, in January 1980 President Carter declared the Persian Gulf to be a US vital interest and warned that any Soviet attempt to gain control over the Gulf would be repelled by any means necessary, including military force. This came to be known as the Carter Doctrine.

One of the key military requirements derived from the Carter Doctrine was to deter or, if necessary, defeat a Soviet invasion of Iran--a truly daunting task. Its difficulty was multiplied manifold by the vast distance to the Gulf region and the almost total lack of support infrastructure. On the other hand, Soviet proximity to Iran and bases in Afghanistan gave them an almost decisive geographical advantage.

This placed the US Army on the horns of a starkly simple force structure dilemma. Because US forces were highly unwelcome in Iran, the United States could deploy forces only after a Soviet invasion had begun, or was very likely to begin. To arrive in time to accomplish anything of significance, forces would have to be deployed by air. However, the only air-deployable force in the Army inventory was one airborne infantry division--even standard infantry divisions were too equipment-heavy to be flown in. Unfortunately, the airborne division was so light that it lacked the firepower, mobility, and supply sustainability to accomplish much against Soviet armored and mechanized forces.

In 1980-81 General Edward ("Shy") Meyer, then Chief of Staff of the Army, set out to solve this force structure dilemma by creating a prototype light division that could be deployed in approximately 1,250 C-141B sorties. To develop sufficient lethality with its light air-transportable equipment, this division would depend upon the latest high-technology precision-guided weaponry and advanced computer-supported command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I). Thus the High-Technology Light Division (HTLD) was born.

### **The Stumbling Block: The Force Development Process**

General Meyer needed the HTLD as soon as he could get it. However, the Army traditionally took years to develop and field even a few items of new equipment and the force structure to fight it--the HTLD needed both hundreds of items of new equipment and a radically different force structure to make it work. As General Meyer saw it, the Army's force development process was the major impediment to rapid development and fielding of the HTLD. With fragmented decisionmaking authority and strong parochial interests, the process could place a stranglehold on efforts to get new technology and warfighting concepts into the field.

Overall responsibility for development and test and evaluation of new equipment and force structure lay with the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), headquartered at Ft. Monroe, Virginia. However, actual responsibility was assigned by functional area to a series of combat centers built around the Army's historical branch structure. Infantry force development was done at the Infantry Center at Ft. Benning, Georgia; armor at the Armor Center at Ft. Knox, Kentucky; artillery at the Artillery Center at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, and so on. Each center jealously guarded its own turf and proceeded at its own pace. A TRADOC sub-headquarters--the Combined Arms Center at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas--ostensibly provided direction and integration for the several centers' efforts. However, the Combined Arms Center had neither a sufficient staff nor sufficient authority to allocate resources among the centers.

The power of each center was reinforced by its position as the focus of the particular service branch community (infantry, armor, artillery, etc.) that it represented. This community consisted of all officers (active duty and retired) of the branch, the industries that produced the equipment for the branch, and the congressional delegations of the districts in which the industries were located. Thus, each center actually represented a community of common interest and inordinate power that stretched from the lowest lieutenant of the branch, through entire industrial regions, to the halls of the Pentagon and Congress. Therefore, each center had tremendous power to control force development in its own area. Any initiative that was marked "not invented here" or that conflicted with a branch's own ideas or interests could be fought and often blocked.

## **Bypassing the Centers: Setting a Collision Course**

General Meyer was attempting to develop a much different capability designed to respond to a substantially altered strategic circumstance. He was looking for new approaches and new concepts. The branches, however, proved to prefer approaches that were considerably more conventional. Henry Kissinger once observed that what frequently passes for future planning is the "extension of the familiar into the future." The Army's branch centers were well equipped for such extensions but substantially incapable of the desired departure.

Although General Meyer certainly had the authority to tell TRADOC what to do, he recognized full well that the centers might delay or otherwise frustrate the HTLD initiative. Therefore, he developed an innovative approach for rapidly developing the prototype division. Rather than parceling out the HTLD initiatives to the centers according to their functional areas, General Meyer decided to use the 9th Infantry Division at Ft. Lewis, Washington, as an integrated "test bed" to develop the HTLD, essentially bypassing the Army's traditional force development mechanism.

The commander of the active-duty 9th Infantry Division was given full responsibility for developing the entire prototype division. He was tasked to develop the concepts for the HTLD, to develop and organize the required force structure, and to examine concepts for field equipment. He was given a small "think tank," direct access to the Chief of Staff, and almost unlimited authority to purchase off-the-shelf equipment for the division to test. He was also allowed to work directly with forward-thinking members of the defense industrial community in a "skunkworks" set up at Ft. Lewis. Thus, field soldiers and civilian metal and electron benders were in the driver's seat--they could literally build their own division to meet General Meyer's concept and his timelines.

Combined with a modest annual additional budget to examine these concepts and a very short time frame to accomplish the design and evaluations, Meyer's innovative approach unleashed a tremendous amount of creativity and attracted some of the brightest minds in the Army and industry. It also cut directly across the entire Army force development bureaucracy with predictable results. The branch centers, armed with the full weight of decades of Army regulations and entrenched interests, resisted at every opportunity.

## **Bureaucratic Battles**

While General Meyer could give the 9th Infantry authority to develop, test, and field concept equipment within the division, he could not authorize it to develop and contract for the final ("objective") versions of equipment for the HTLD. By law and regulation, that responsibility lay with TRADOC, the Army Staff, and the Army Materiel Command (AMC). Therein lay the Achilles' heel of General Meyer's brilliant concept.

The equipment battles were many and fierce. The 9th Infantry fought with stunning innovation and field testing and access to the Chief of Staff--the centers, backed in many cases by the weight and power of the Army Materiel Command laboratories, fought back with Army regulations and exceptional bureaucratic staying power. Two notable skirmishes are worth citing for illustration.

. *The Fast Attack Vehicle*. This was the media image of the HTLD--the dune buggy equipped with a TOW missile launcher. The 9th's concept was to equip an entire battalion with these vehicles. In test after test this "Fast Attack Battalion" demonstrated awesome maneuverability (60 kilometers per hour over rugged terrain) and firepower. The Infantry Center at Ft. Benning insisted, however, that the TOW *must* have a three-man crew (as the center had previously determined in its *own* field testing). The commercial dune buggies used by the 9th could carry only two, who seemed to do the job just fine. Besides, if only two soldiers were needed to man each TOW in the 9th, then the same was true for every TOW in the Army, and the total number of infantry soldiers could be reduced. Therefore, Ft. Benning developed a three-man dune buggy, as ungainly a vehicle as you would ever want to see. The Fast Attack Vehicle concept was abandoned.

. *Ground-Launched Hellfire Missiles*. The 9th's concept here was to mount the laser-guided Hellfire missile (developed for the Apache attack helicopter) on the back of a HMMWV (the "Hummer," a light all-terrain truck). A platoon of six launchers in each maneuver battalion gave the battalion the ability to destroy an entire enemy tank

battalion at over ten kilometers--an unprecedented capability. But the Hellfire used in this mode was an indirect fire weapon, and Army regulations assigned responsibility for indirect fire weapons with such ranges to the artillery. The Artillery Center captured the ground-launched Hellfire program and proceeded to turn it into an artillery weapon, completed with ground-launched Hellfire batteries organized into full battalions. The concept was later abandoned.

Force structure decisions also gored many sacred cows. Traditionally, Army battalions are organized by pure branches--an infantry battalion has three or four infantry companies, etc. But they don't fight that way. In combat an infantry battalion will swap one of its infantry companies for a tank company from an armored battalion. This means that units live and sometimes train differently from the way they fight, with an obvious decline in combat effectiveness.

To avoid this, the 9th organized its units as combined arms battalions permanently composed of companies from the different branches. This made great sense from the standpoint of combat effectiveness, unit cohesion, training, logistical sustainability, etc. But who would be responsible for such battalions? Who would command them--infantry or armor? The 9th won this battle but lost the war.

## **Decisive Battle**

The 9th and its HTLD concept survived the loss of many of these skirmishes through the tenure of a new Chief of Staff, General John Wickham (whose focus was fielding another new division, the 10,000-man light infantry division), and into that of General Carl Vuono. But it finally had to fight a decisive battle for its key weapon system, the so-called Armored Gun System (AGS).

After several years of experimentation and testing, the 9th had concluded that even with its numerous antitank missile systems it could accomplish its mission of defeating heavy armored forces in Mideastern deserts only with a direct-fire tank-killing weapon mounted on a tracked vehicle. Early efforts to modify an existing Army system (the aging and temperamental Sheridan) proved unworkable, leading to the development of the AGS, a lightly-armored tracked vehicle mounting a low-recoil 105mm gun. To make it effective against much heavier armor, the AGS was equipped with the latest suspension system for added mobility and a stabilized turret and the best available fire direction system for accurate firing on the move. This also made it relatively expensive--and proved to be its undoing.

To the uninitiated (and even to the initiated) the AGS looked like a light tank--and the Armor Center had been against light tanks ever since its unpleasant experience with tank destroyers during World War II. Moreover, the AGS competed with the M1 tank program for funding, which was increasingly tight. The Army (specifically the armor community) had just finished battling for funding to upgun the M1 with a new, heavier 120mm gun. It had also rather ungraciously destroyed a program developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency for a light, agile tank with a high-velocity 75mm gun. Clearly, the Army was headed toward a heavier tank, not a lighter one, and the AGS was at total cross-purposes with this major M1 upgrade effort by a very powerful community.

Faced with a choice between funding either the AGS or the upgraded M1 tank, the Army Staff, supported by TRADOC, decided for the M1, killing the AGS program. Without the AGS, the HTLD could never meet its full mission requirement. In 1988 General Vuono decided to convert the 9th back to a standard mechanized infantry division. Before it returned to its original configuration, the division was disbanded as part of the Army's downsizing program.

## **The Present**

It may be that the HTLD concept was ahead of its time, a light, highly deployable yet lethal force competing for resources in a period when the Army was focused on defeating heavy Soviet forces in Europe. But as the defensive first phase of the Gulf War (and more recently Kosovo) demonstrated, the Army needed then (and needs even more now) to transform itself into the type of force exemplified by the HTLD. Losing the HTLD cost the Army 20 years in the transformation process. It cannot afford to lose another 20. To make the current transformation initiative a success, the Army must learn from its own history, identify the landmines along the path to transformation, and avoid them.

We also need to recognize that the HTLD process did a lot of things right. First, it avoided "development by committee" by giving the transformation mission and the authority and resources to execute it to one person (the

division commander) working directly for the Chief of Staff. Second, it empowered soldiers and their first-line leaders and their industrial counterparts to achieve rapid results. Third, it transformed an entire division, creating a stand-alone operationally significant force capable of independent operations.

This focus on only a single division rather than the entire Army unfortunately proved to be the HTLD's undoing. Had the effort focused instead on transforming the entire Army (General Meyer's original idea), the proven power of the initiative's ideas might have defeated the inertia of the internal bureaucracy. Instead, the bureaucracy was able to isolate the HTLD as a unique case for a single unique mission requirement. Because the HTLD required limited numbers of unique weapon systems (like the AGS) that were not required throughout the entire Army, their unit cost was high. A relatively lightweight claimant for resources, the HTLD was eventually defeated on the grounds that the cost of the unique capability it represented was unaffordable.

The major lesson to be learned, however, is that the Army's force development process at that time, run by independent power centers "stovepiped" from the platoon level to Capitol Hill, was best suited for slow, incremental change. The Army was institutionally incapable of developing and fielding a force based on radically new approaches. In the Army's bureaucratic political process, a radical concept, even supported by the highest Army leadership, had little chance against well-armed, entrenched traditional interests. When it needed to make dramatic changes, the Army was often its own worst enemy, reflecting the immortal words of Walt Kelly's cartoon character Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he are us."

The Army did many things right in its previous effort to transform itself. The HTLD experimentation contributed significantly to the Army, including training leaders who went on to rise to the service's highest positions. Unfortunately, these were all tactical victories, and as Clausewitz said, you cannot make up for strategic failure with tactical success. The failure of the Army's last effort to transform was due to a strategic failure--the failure to simultaneously transform the institution that had to produce a transformed force.

In its urgent need to find a clear path to effective transformation today, the Army should closely examine the record of its own recent past and avoid the pitfalls that destroyed its previous effort. If we are to transform the force, we must first transform the institution that creates the force.

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Reviewed 12 February 2001. Please send comments or corrections to [carl\\_Parameters@conus.army.mil](mailto:carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil)