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# Insights from the Army's Drawdowns

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Jason W. Warren

**ABSTRACT:** This article provides five insights extracted from discussions concerning the Army's long history of drawdowns. Perhaps the most important take-away is the Army can, and should, use the current drawdown constructively.

With the termination of the recent campaign in Iraq and the winnowing of forces in Afghanistan, the US military faces a drawdown of standing force structure and capabilities. The policy debate concerning how best to carry out this force reduction, however, lacks proper historical perspective. Twenty-four civilian historians and military professionals recently offered such a perspective by focusing on previous drawdowns over the span of American history. Beginning with a consideration of the cyclical nature of drawdowns and whether a crisis mentality is warranted in such periods, three major questions emerged. Was the attempt to preserve military effectiveness during drawdowns contradictory to traditional American values? Given the reoccurrence of force reductions in American history, how did the military best preserve combat capabilities? What was the relationship between the regular standing Army and militia/National Guard forces, and how did these reflect broader attitudes towards the military? Insights from the discussions follow.<sup>1</sup>

## **1. The drawdown of American forces has been a cyclical part of the nation's military experience.**

Whether they allowed colonial forts to fall into disrepair or furloughed hundreds of thousands of battle-hardened Union troops after the US Civil War, Americans historically have tightened their financial belts at the conclusion of major conflicts. This attitude reflects traditional Anglo-American values dating back to the late-Middle Ages in England. Latent fears of regular armies surfaced before the Revolutionary War with both the Quartering Act and the Boston Massacre. Americans carried these attitudes forward into the twenty-first century.

The debate over the US military establishment has never been a purely rational one with biases inherent in the American cultural framework. Concerns over previous drawdowns have not run counter to traditional American values, and have not always been justified even by initial combat effectiveness. For example, the Kennedy/Johnson administrations reversed conventional drawdowns of the Eisenhower era in time to create the most competent US Army ever to engage in the initial battle of any war up to 1965. American forces also met with initial successes in 2001 and 2003 after a decade of drawdowns, paralleling the

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<sup>1</sup> The US Army War College's Center for Strategic Leadership & Development and the US Army Heritage & Education Center recently hosted an academic forum on the history of America's military reductions after large-scale conflicts. Dr. John Bonin helped formulate the ideas for this article and assisted in its publication.

US experience nearly forty years earlier. However, American forces have not always reconstituted effectively for battle. Significant drawdowns left the Army unprepared for initial campaigns in the early 1790s against Native Americans, the War of 1812, the US Civil War, the Spanish-American War, both World Wars, and the Korean War. Significantly, these wars ended in American military victory, indicating the initial risk of fielding forces based on reduced military infrastructure, though costly in “first battles,” has often been acceptable in terms of overall strategic costs. Put differently, US foreign policy and national strategy objectives often exceeded military means. There was unanimous agreement among conference participants on this point.

## **2. Competition between the Regular Army and National Guard (militia) has always been part of the American military discourse.**

A number of scholars highlighted the historical importance of this competition. This debate is both rational and irrational as it stems from Anglo-Americans’ historic preference for “virtuous” militia over “suspect” standing armies, while overlooking the sometimes poor initial military performance of militia/National Guard forces. A serving officer’s presentation detailed how the relationship between active and reserve components works best in a complementary (but not interchangeable) arrangement. This complementary nature was largely evident in Afghanistan and Iraq, which reversed the mutual animosity that appeared during the Gulf War. American attitudes changed during the Cold War to consider active component forces as “citizen-soldiers,” in a manner once reserved only for National Guard/militia forces, thus the American public conflates the two components. The advent of the all-volunteer force in 1973 solidified this outlook. Two participants indicated the importance of reserve components increased with the termination of the draft and the unlikelihood of its reconstitution, as well as the continuing question of the eligibility of women for selective service. The apparent irreversibility of the all-volunteer force and the merging of the active component’s reputation with that of the reserve components changed the nature of the discourse over the roles and perceptions of both components.

## **3. The Army has historically focused on education and professionalization as mitigating factors during drawdowns.**

Participants agreed unanimously on this point, and as one historian from the conference put it, “education is a hedge against uncertainty.” The early 1800s witnessed the creation of West Point to address performance shortcomings, and the impetus after the War of 1812 was for a more professional officer corps. In the decades after the Civil War, Emory Upton and William Tecumseh Sherman attempted doctrinal and educational reforms. Sherman established Fort Leavenworth as the Army’s intellectual center during this period. Operational failures in the Spanish-American War led to the establishment of the US Army War College in 1901. At the conclusion of World War I, which was followed by a significant military drawdown, the Army again focused its attention on educating and broadening the next crop of officers, such as Dwight

D. Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, and George S. Patton. With only a skeleton standing army after 1921, leaders emphasized intellectual preparation and solving complex problems in Army schools instead of commanding troops. The Army's culture of the post-1950 era, however, shifted to emphasize tactical training at the expense of education and broadening. With a large-standing force to combat communism, leaders sought troop command and training assignments. The officer corps de-emphasized broadening and education as a way to achieve high command. For instance General William Westmoreland, who eventually rose to become Army Chief of Staff after Vietnam, never attended professional military education. Three scholars argued the military's talent-management system, which reflected management principles of the earlier Industrial Age, has been inadequate. There were few systematic attempts to connect an officer's education with future assignments. A number of participants said drawdown periods have often been fertile ground for "mavericks," whose theorizing about armor and the integration of other new technologies in the interwar period, paid dividends in World War II. Similar hypothesizing about the structure of Army forces during the 1990s laid the basis for the contemporary modular force.

#### **4. Drawdowns have frequently resulted in cuts to headquarters elements, enabling forces, and niche capabilities that have been detrimental to future operations.**

Four participants discussed headquarters reductions at the conclusions of the World Wars, Vietnam, and the Gulf War, which created gaps in critical billets. As with Combined Joint Task Force 7 in Iraq, a lack of a tailored headquarters led to failed operations (and contributed to the Abu Ghraib incident). After early disasters in North Africa during World War II, General Eisenhower created the equivalent of a land component command. The initial crisis in Korea caused General MacArthur to advocate (successfully) for an increase of Army corps headquarters from one to eight. At the outbreak of the Gulf War, the Army had reduced US Army Central (3rd Army) staff to one-quarter capacity, which was not unusual for the All-Volunteer Force, as General Creighton Abrams had set the precedent for reducing various Army headquarters in the post-Vietnam era. This reduction resulted in a much slower build-up during Operation Desert Shield. Of course, the quantity of headquarters personnel relates directly to increased missions, as smaller staffs have been sufficient in peacetime.

Three scholars argued niche capabilities should not fall victim to drawdowns. Cutting them has created shortcomings, such as failure to develop an adequate tank corps or submarine fleet during the interwar years. Maintaining an Army amphibious capability post-1945 proved critical in Korea and Panama. More recent cuts to enablers such as logistical units and military police (or placing the majority in the reserve components) has been fraught with risk. One of the biggest issues for planners leading up to the Iraq War was a lack of line-haul trucks (rented mainly from Kuwaitis) to move heavy equipment to assembly areas. This lack of equipment literally dictated where operations could be conducted and with what forces. The US capability for power projection through "setting the theater" relies on such enablers. Traditional allies can offset capabilities lost during drawdowns. This offset occurred during the

late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance, when the British fleet and merchant marine cooperated with limited US naval forces.

The historic precedence for maintaining brigade combat teams as the bedrock formation of the Army stems from George Washington's Continental Army, which relied on brigades commanded by brigadier generals in combined arms teams (infantry, artillery, and dragoons). Its heir, the "Legion" of the early 1790s, also relied on a combined arms brigade model. Four scholars discussed the cadre and expansible Army concepts for which the brigade (or its subordinate elements) has often been the building block. Employing a cadre concept in past eras, the Army eliminated the lower skill levels, while maintaining a mid-ranking cadre in the institutional Army that served as leadership in reconstituted units. Cadre maintained basic leadership and training skills by serving in training billets. In the 1820s, Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, enacted a similar option known as the "expansible Army," where cut-backs reduced units' junior-enlisted personnel, while retaining sergeants and officers. After Vietnam, General Abrams instituted "roundout" battalions and brigades, in which designated reserve component forces filled active component formations. There is also precedence for long-service professionals manning more technical functions requiring extensive experience, such as the War Department bureaus manned by the Regular Army during the Civil War. One historian noted America's transition to an Information-Age economy, but reequipping units would prove more problematic than in past conflicts.

### **5. Conventional capabilities have been a better investment over past drawdowns than technological panaceas and unconventional forces.**

A number of scholars noted technical and tactical transformations have improved tactics and in some cases operations, but "revolutions in military affairs" have not led directly to victory. Clausewitz maintained war's nature is dependent on the interplay of social, political, and military forces, rather than on new technologies and tactics. Changes in the means of fighting – whether nuclear, cyber, or special operating forces and airpower – have not altered the relationship of variables fundamental to war. Although Information-Age technology proved critical early in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was indecisive in both instances. Once Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters dug elementary fighting positions, special operations forces required Northern Alliance and US infantry formations to conduct conventional fire and maneuver to dislodge them. In Iraq, urban conditions and the need to interact with Iraqis during the population-centric counterinsurgency phase of operations required large conventional capabilities. Special operations forces are also dependent on conventional Army force structure, such as rotary-wing, intelligence, security, medical, logistics, and quick-reaction forces – the very enablers often ignored during the calculation of forces in planning. Atomic weapons, prevented a major clash between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, did nothing to deter war more generally, as Korea, Vietnam, and many other conflicts demonstrate. Presenters noted the foundational nature of conventional army capabilities, often in support of joint or allied forces, during every major conflict.

These five insights may prove useful to today's military and political leaders who face the daunting prospect of reducing US military capabilities. If leaders can take any solace from history, it is that drawdowns have proven to be a cyclical part of the American military experience, and as irrational as the debate may become, the US military, especially the Army, has often rebounded to meet future challenges.

