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THE FUTURE U. S. ARMY: OUTLOOK FOR THE 1990's

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THE ROLE OF THE U.S. ARMY IN THE EMERGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT: AN OVERVIEW

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY

GENERAL JOHN W. VESSEY, USA RET.
(Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff)

The remarks of General Vessey were delivered on 21 March 1990 at the first in a series of eight guest speaker presentations to be held for congressional representatives and members of their staffs. The series is cosponsored by the AUSA Institute of Land Warfare and the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis. The overall theme of the series is "The Future U.S. Army: Outlook for the 1990's." A separate Background Brief will be issued on each of the eight topics to be presented.

Calling continued future peace "the most important peace dividend" to be derived from the changing international security environment, General John W. Vessey addressed the first in a series of congressional seminars on the future of the U.S. Army.

General Vessey termed events taking place in Europe today "exciting and thrilling," but warned that such an environment is at the same time highly uncertain. Some trends can be discerned which are likely to characterize the future security environment in Europe, many of which were outlined in the Discriminate Deterrence Report of 1989. Among these are: movement from a bipolar to a multipolar world; continuing technological revolution and dispersion of advanced weapons technologies; discontinuities, or unpredictable circumstances; and the continued status of the U.S.S.R. as the strongest potential enemy of the United States. With this in mind, Vessey suggested that skepticism with regard to Soviet actions on the part of the United States is absolutely necessary in preparing forces adequate to ensure U.S. national security. The United States must react only to actual change in Soviet force capabilities, not to anything less. "The Soviet Union is what it is, will be what it will be, and can do what it can do," stated General Vessey, suggesting that U.S. policy must be built upon realistic analysis of Soviet capabilities.

General Vessey offered that the United States is now at a major fork in the security road it has traveled since the end of the Second World War. The greatest threat to our continued security at this time, according to Vessey, is our "traditional inability to prepare to meet a threat we cannot clearly see." Thus we fall into the trap of having to force the nation through sudden surges of effort to meet specific threats when it becomes clear that our preparations were inadequate. The challenge facing the United States today is to move forward into the multipolar world without making the same sorts of mistakes we have made in the past, substituting wishful thinking for armed strength.

The United States Army, said Vessey, is the "lynchpin of the national military establishment." Among the services, only the Army can be effective in maintaining control over and protecting territory. It thus becomes the "arbiter of security" for the nation and its people. But like national policy as a whole, the Army must be capable of moving into the unfolding security environment and adapting where necessary if it is to remain relevant.

Vessey described the Army as "superbly designed and ready for today's problems." Its active component is of very high quality, as are its reserve elements, although a changing world may require considerable changes in the structure of the force. Both strategic mobility and the reserve components will become ever more critical in an era of economic and arms control pressure for force reductions. The Army's light forces are highly capable and mobile, but are not sufficient to meet enemy heavy forces, while American heavy forces today have this capability, but are not sufficiently mobile. Strategic lift is an important ingredient and heavy forces need to be configured for more rapid deployment.

Increases in warning time associated with force reductions in Europe will serve to shift the focus of U.S. efforts more and more to reserve forces. This course, however, will entail surmounting several obstacles. Reserve forces would need to be capable of engaging in combat, as well as being deployed in national emergency situations which require much different skills and training. Thus it may be necessary to introduce a higher degree of civilianization, or to utilize reserve forces in mobility and transportation roles now occupied by combat forces.

Having evaluated the Army's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the changing international circumstances in which it must operate, Vessey summarized his vision of a future U.S. Army. The Army, he said, must be able to reach zones of conflict very quickly, to fire quickly and accurately, to limit collateral damage to the lowest possible degree, and to return to its original base. Such an army would fulfill many of the same roles the United States has historically assigned to it, but its structure, force levels, and equipment might differ quite considerably from its current characteristics.