
Defense Report

AUSA



It's Time to Modernize the Army—And There is More to It Than Just Buying Equipment

When the U.S. Army became directly involved in Vietnam it was completing the transition from a family of weapons and equipment that was essentially of Korean War vintage to a new generation of helicopters, tanks, radios and wheeled vehicles. The years of war in Vietnam used that new family very hard and, although the equipment in the hands of our forces there was gathered up and returned to the United States almost down to the last rifle, much of it required major overhaul before it could be used again. This period was followed by a shift to an all-volunteer force which drove the personnel-related defense costs to almost 60 percent of the defense budget, leaving little in the till for procurement of new weapons or the proper maintenance of the old ones.

While the U.S. Army was in this state of materiel stagnation its most likely adversary, the Soviet Army, was blossoming with new equipment. Since 1960, the Red Army has introduced 60 new major systems. While the Soviets designed, tested and produced large numbers of three successively better tanks we have been able to field just one (the M60) and it will be several years before its successor, the XM1 "Abrams" will be in the field in numbers. Since 1960, also, the Soviets have equipped their forces with six new air defense systems and have augmented a chemical warfare capability far exceeding that possessed by the United States and its allies.

Our Army is now ready to move into its next generation of equipment in a large way, with 400 systems—40 of them considered "major"—ready for procurement or in the final stages of development. Some production has begun on the Abrams tank and the UH-60A "Blackhawk" helicopter that will eventually replace the worn "Hueys" of the Vietnam era. Major expenditures are planned for new fighting vehicles to replace the current personnel carriers that have been in use for more than 20 years and for air defense systems to provide more effective protection against the increasing threat of Soviet tactical airpower. The cost of all this, over the next five years, will amount to billions of dollars.

We should realize, though, that the cost in dollars for procurement is not the only price we must pay to bring our Army up to date and to improve its future effectiveness. Each new system, whether it involves weaponry, transportation or communication, will take advantage of state-of-the-art improvements in technology. New doctrine will be created to make full use of new capabilities. New force structure may be required as well as revised plans for maintenance and supply. The people who use them may have to be retrained. Some of the new systems require bigger crews than the old ones, so the size of the Army may have to be increased.

If we are to have a truly modern Army we must be prepared to pay the full price.