

# Reversal of Readiness

By LTG James M. Dubik

U.S. Army retired

Postwar periods of reduction are always difficult. The one the nation is going through now is particularly hard. Why? First, we're not in a postwar period—we're still at war. Second, the nation seems to lack a common vision for the future, with respect to how our military should be

used. We seem stuck on hope as our method. Drawdowns without a compelling vision end up budget-driven, not strategy-driven. In a world like ours, with so much ambiguity, so many varieties of war plausible, and so many continuing global interests and responsibilities, America needs a more complete

public discussion of our military requirements and our ability to meet them. No one doubts the demands of our fiscal situation, but that shouldn't result in choices that may do more harm to U.S. interests in the long run.

—GEN Gordon R. Sullivan  
U.S. Army retired

Just five years after the U.S. Army helped defeat the Axis powers in both the European and Pacific theaters, it was nearly pushed off the Korean Peninsula by a peasant army of North Koreans. No one anticipated this reversal of readiness, but it happened nonetheless. In *The Korean War*, Max Hastings writes, “[This reversal] was a direct consequence of [Defense Secretary Louis] Johnson’s policies, approved by [President Harry S] Truman that by June 1950 ... divisions lacked 62 percent of their infantry firepower and 14 percent of their tanks ... and ... the Army in Japan possessed only forty-five days’ supply of ammunition.” Many also believed that the high-tech weapons of the time (air power and atomic weapons) would offset the need for ground forces.

The Army will probably not suffer a reversal of readiness similar to that which followed World War II, but our senior military and civilian leaders are watching closely. For the past 12 years, the Army has been ridden hard and is now being put away wet. The risk of unintended consequences is real, especially given several misleading or outright false propositions that are increasingly part of the discussion on U.S. strategy and defense planning.

First among these misleading propositions is that our wars are over. America is confusing “withdrawing from a war” with “ending a war.” The two are very different. A war ends when strategic objectives are met or an enemy is defeated and recognizes its defeat. In Iraq, the war continues—albeit

at a level that the Iraqi security forces are, so far, able to handle and the Iraqi government can manage. The growing instability in Iraq, spillover from the situation in Syria and Iranian influences all make Iraq a tenuous place. We hope to achieve sufficient stability in Afghanistan, but such a result is not a foregone conclusion—especially if we leave behind too few NATO troops to support and train the Afghan National Army, or if the Afghan government exacerbates internal and regional tensions instead of relieving them. We are shifting our strategy against al Qaeda from one defined as “disrupt, dismantle and defeat” to one that uses drones, an occasional special operations forces raid, and surrogates to manage terrorism—meaning, in the words of David Sanger in *Confront and Conceal*, “a precise, directed economy of force ... that quickly runs into limitations.” The drone approach is a de facto strategy of punishment and attrition with all the attendant assumptions and risks. Reducing readiness while at war is a dangerous strategy.

Equally dangerous is the United States’ bias toward over-believing in technological solutions—for example, “lethal, fast and remote” solutions; “rapid, decisive” operations; and “light footprints.” While the United States faces no overwhelming existential threat, most analysts agree that we do face significant ambiguity, with a reasonable probability of becoming involved in some kind of complex contingency operation that cannot be solved by relying on our technological advances.

*Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, published by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) in December 2012, for example, states that our future holds a potential for increased conflict, both interstate and intrastate. Among the reasons cited for the potential increase are these: individuals and nonstate organizations with access to disruptive technologies and instruments of war; diffusion of power; growing competition for ever-scarcer resources like water, energy and food; fragile governments; shifting demographics; wider scope of regional instability; and potentially stalled economic growth. The *Global Trends* forecast for multiple forms of war comes at a time of rising uncertainty as to the United States’ willingness or ability to be the guarantor of security, and increased ambiguity as to the stability of the international system. At one point, the NIC lists reasons that some found its conclusions too optimistic.

The study also suggests that hard military power will retain some utility, for “great power conflict [though likely to decline] may not be inconceivable.” Its utility, however, diminishes given the kinds of conflicts the authors see emerging. The reader is left to conclude that complex contingency operations, hybrid warfare, irregular warfare, intrastate warfare, or “war amongst the people,” as Sir Rupert Smith calls them in *Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*—as well as the potential spillover into wider conflagrations affecting the interests of major states—will

require ground, conventional and special operations forces to resolve.

Third is the human capacity for denial. The 1989 invasion of Panama required a large number of ground forces. Significant ground forces were also necessary to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The ethnic cleansing in Bosnia was finally stopped by an air/ground campaign, and enforcing the Dayton Accords required significant ground forces. The Kosovo bombing campaign punished the Serbs, but once again, only NATO's stabilizing ground forces stopped the ethnic cleansing. In Afghanistan and Iraq, fewer forces were necessary to remove regimes than were needed for the security and counterinsurgency operations that followed. So, when the mantra of "never again" is applied to the employment of large ground forces, Americans should be skeptical.

Reality forced itself on the Bill Clinton administration, which did not want to "do" Bosnia, as well as the George W. Bush administration, which did not want to fight a counterinsurgency. The Barack Obama administration may yet find itself in the same position—forced to do what it does not want to do. How the situation plays out in the Maghreb, the Middle East, Southwest Asia, Iran, the Levant or North Korea is very much an open question. An adversary's calculation of U.S. leadership and capacity, moreover, is an important factor in how the future unfolds. In fact, resolution of plausible scenarios in each of the geographic locations listed would require much more than a "light footprint" or a "lethal, fast and remote" approach.

A fourth misleading proposition that makes unintended erosion of readiness possible concerns reaction time. The United States has been surprised more often than not. A decision for a democracy to use force is often drawn out, and executing a decision takes longer still. Time is a precious commodity. So the premise that America's ubiquitous intelligence capacity will allow us the time to prepare for a slow-emerging threat or adapt to an unfolding situation may apply, but only to a very limited band of possible scenarios. John

Keegan's admonition in *Intelligence in War* hits the nail on the head: "Foreknowledge is no protection against disaster. Even real-time intelligence is never real enough. Only force finally counts." Forces-in-being provide political leaders with options; forces-*in-potentia* do not.

Similarly dubious is the argument that America's military capacity should be focused on a forced-entry capacity. Of course, such a capacity is necessary, but it is a preliminary capacity: Access is gained or entry forced as a means to employ a follow-on force; sometimes small and for a short duration, but often not. To focus primarily on anti-access or forced entry is to confuse a means with an end.

Again, the human capacity for denial is huge. Wanting U.S. strategic challenges to be fixable by a "light footprint," a "lethal, fast and remote" approach or a "rapid, decisive" operation does not make it so. Nor does wishing that America can anticipate its strategic challenges make it so. In this time of strategic ambiguity, while we remain fighting an active, global enemy—and with other potential threats to American security interests—the actual American ground force requirements seem to be in inverse relationship to the direction the United States is taking.

Fifth comes the false belief that waging war is solely a military matter. Almost all analysts believe that military force will remain necessary but insufficient to succeed in the kinds of "hybrid warfare" situations most see in the future. Yet the nation's ability to

identify the right strategy; raise, employ and coordinate the right military and nonmilitary elements of that strategy; and adapt that strategy flexibly and quickly as conditions in the war change cannot be listed as American strategic strengths. Improving these strategic deficiencies, however, is rarely part of any debate about American defense strategy.

Last, the Army's own can-do attitude is a potential contributor to the unintended consequence of reversing readiness. Of course, the can-do attitude is a two-sided coin. On one side, the Army's positive spirit is essential, desired and necessary. Spirit and morale have carried many units to success, even in the direst of situations. A winning and aggressive spirit, the hallmark of America's Army, is not made from pessimism—nor can it be. The other side of the coin, however, is a propensity associated with all downsizing periods: avoiding brutal honesty.

None of the foregoing is an argument against reducing the United States' defense budget, the Army's included. The American way of war costs the nation too much in personnel, weaponry and equipment, and too much in supplies and logistic support. This trend is partially due to having a professional force. Other cost-driving factors, however, are also present: chasing higher and higher technology, outsourcing too much to contractors, and having fewer suppliers of war-related items and services. Military infrastructure is too large when compared to the size of our forces; excess infrastructure must be reduced. Social expectations—what our nation's citi-

zens expect is provided to deployed soldiers—also contribute to rising costs. Finally, U.S. acquisition and contracting laws and regulations add to the rising costs of war.

War isn't going away. The nation needs a way to reduce the overall cost of waging war and sustaining its military forces. Believing that our wars are over; that all future engagements can take a "light footprint" approach or be resolved with a "lethal, fast and

remote" operation; that we will have enough time to grow what we need to face a future threat; or that war is solely a military matter are all delusions.

The nation needs a serious and public discussion about its defense needs and the strategy to meet those needs. Cutting by sequester, absent such a public discussion, increases the risk of gutting U.S. ground forces and unintentionally reversing readiness. No

one desires such a consequence, but it could happen nonetheless. The nation could find itself having fewer strategic options than it actually needs, and repeating mistakes at the expense of American blood. □

---

*LTG James M. Dubik, USA Ret., is a former commander of Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq and a senior fellow of AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare.*

---

**"No trinkets, guns or whiskey. Just a timetable for withdrawal."**

# ARCIC/AUSA WRITING CONTEST



The Army Capabilities Integration Center (ARCIC) is seeking to identify, discuss and influence the outcome of significant defense issues that affect the U.S. Army. To allow for more direct participation in the public debate of defense-related issues, ARCIC and the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) are once again cosponsoring a writing contest. The submission of quality manuscripts is encouraged.

Contest participants may choose from four themes:

- The Network as a Weapon and Mission Command;
- Asia–Pacific and the Middle East;
- Special Operations Forces and General Purpose Forces Integration; and
- America’s Next First Battles in 2030–2040.

Papers must be original, unpublished and between 5,000 and 10,000 words, with a one-page synopsis and a brief biography of the author. The deadline for submission is 31 May 2013. A cash prize of \$1,000 will be paid to the winner, and all papers will be submitted to AUSA’s Institute of Land Warfare for possible publication.\*

\* Essays submitted by individuals employed by/assigned to ARCIC and by individuals employed by AUSA national headquarters may be considered for publication by AUSA, but those individuals will not be eligible to receive the cash prize.

The United States Army neither states nor implies any endorsement of the Association of the United States Army, the Institute of Land Warfare or any other nonfederal entity participating in this event.

## Paper Submissions

*on disk only to:*

ARCIC Initiatives Group  
ATTN: J. Wiseman  
Room 4105B, Building 950  
950 Jefferson Ave  
Fort Eustis, VA 23604

*or e-mailed to:*

john.w.wiseman2.civ@mail.mil

*For more information,  
visit [www.arcic.army.mil](http://www.arcic.army.mil)*

