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Will the Next QDR Repeat the Mistakes of the Past?

by William R. Hawkins

The first Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) took place in 1997. The second is scheduled for the end of September 2001. When Congress mandated the QDR process, it was envisioned as a comprehensive examination of America's defense needs out to 2015. The Pentagon was supposed to tell Congress directly what was needed to protect the nation's interests, and how much it would cost. The first QDR was hampered in this regard by a politically imposed assumption by an incumbent administration that defense spending would be limited to a \$250 billion annual budget (in real terms). Thus the conclusions were driven by fiscal rather than strategic factors.

As a result, a huge gap existed in the first QDR between its declared strategy and its proposed force levels. The U.S. military was tasked to be able to fight two major theater wars (MTWs) and engage in "multiple" small-scale contingencies (SSCs) even as it was expected to shrink in size.

The next QDR may be even worse, cutting back on strategy to close the gap rather than proposing an expansion of forces. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has all but officially declared dead the "two major theater war" standard for force sizing. The Army may be particularly hard pressed. Prominent studies done since the first QDR have called for further cuts in active land combat units.

The National Defense Panel (NDP), an outside group of experts created to critique the first QDR, took a very high-tech perspective hostile to Army heavy units, seeing them as part of an obsolete status quo. Instead, the panel focused on over-the-horizon power projection. The NDP stated: "It is not clear whether the solution is to be found in Air Force long-range precision strikes; strikes from a Navy task force composed of a 'distributed' strike force . . . ; Army forces employing long-range missiles and weaponized, unmanned aerial vehicles; Marine 'infestation' teams calling in long-range precision fires."¹ Yet each of these options is some form of the same strategy of "long-range precision strikes," indistinguishable except for the service operating the launch platforms. Airpower enthusiasts have since claimed that Kosovo was won by this approach, without there having been any need to deploy troops on the ground.

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Another influential study group, the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century (USCNS/21)—chaired by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman—was chartered in 1998 as a federal advisory commission. Its final Phase III report, released in February 2001, implied more than it stated directly. For the Army, it presented a mixed bag. On the one hand, it argued for smaller conventional forces than at present and a shift, for the expeditionary and constabulary roles, toward lighter ground forces which can be deployed faster. It did not single out airpower, however. And, with its emphasis on the political side of conflict, the report indirectly boosted the role of ground troops since only their presence can enforce stability.²

What mix of ideas emerges at the core of the next QDR will determine whether the United States avoids—or repeats for the sixth time in less than 60 years—the mistake of downsizing and devaluing the role of ground troops.

The first attempt to substitute airpower for landpower (as opposed to providing air support to the land campaign) came in World War II. In 1943, even before the invasion of France or the Philippines, the decision was made to limit the Army to 90 divisions. The resources saved from canceling over half the divisions planned in 1941 were to go to expanding the heavy bomber force. More bombers would need a larger share of industrial capacity and manpower to be built and crewed, and more of the scarce shipping space to be deployed and sustained.

General George C. Marshall opined at the time, “The air-arm should be our most effective weapon in bringing home to the German people and the German army the futility of continued resistance.”³ This decision to limit the Army was influenced by overly enthusiastic prewar predictions of the irresistible nature of strategic bombing. In 1925, Billy Mitchell had proclaimed in his book *Winged Defense*: “It is probable that future wars again will be conducted by a special class, the air force, as it was by the armored knights of the Middle Ages. Again, the whole population will not have to be called in the event of an emergency, but only enough of it to man the machines that are the most potent in national defense.”⁴

Fifty thousand American airmen lost their lives vainly trying to prove this point over places like Schweinfurt and Ploesti, while Army divisions fighting their way into Germany found themselves spread thin and perilously understrength in both combat and support troops. Had the political decision been made to beat the Soviets to Berlin or Prague, the Army might not have been able to do so.

After World War II, the military was rapidly demobilized across the board, with the thought that the atomic bomb had made large-scale conventional war obsolete. Had not the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Tokyo to surrender without an invasion? It was thought no country could survive such an air campaign in the future.

This left American ground troops unprepared for the Korean War. The first reaction of President Truman to the North Korean invasion of the south was to order air and naval strikes—but without nuclear weapons. Such attacks could be successful only in support of an army in the field. Without troops on the ground, American firepower could punish the enemy but could not stop his advance. The entire U.S. Army, however, consisted of only ten divisions in 1950. The 24th Infantry Division was the first to be rushed into battle. It paid a heavy price for this lack of preparedness, as it and reinforcing units were pushed back to Pusan.

After the Korean War, the Eisenhower administration downplayed conventional warfare in favor of massive retaliation based on nuclear weapons. This shift was codified in 1953, making it the third time in ten years that the role of the Army was downgraded. A memorandum from the civilian service Secretaries to the Joint Chiefs stressed “the need for greater reliance upon our allies for the provision of indigenous forces, particularly ground forces, in countering local communist aggressions, with greater stress upon our atomic capability as our major contribution to the needs of collective security.”⁵ The

popular term for this was “more bang for the buck.” Even so, though the Army was reduced to 14 divisions with a million soldiers, it remained larger than the Army of today.

Vietnam was not fought with nuclear weapons, nor did the air campaign against North Vietnam turn the tide of battle, let alone persuade Hanoi’s leaders to abandon the conquest of South Vietnam. Limited-war theorists such as Thomas Schelling, who insisted that a “diplomacy of violence” through air attacks would lead to peace, were again proven wrong. While Washington sent bombers against the north, Hanoi sent an army against the south. Using the terminology of North Vietnam’s General Vo Nguyen Giap, the “people’s war of liberation” defeated the “aero-naval war of destruction” waged by the United States.⁶

In the aftermath of Vietnam, Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter returned to the Eisenhower strategy of downplaying “ground wars in Asia” (or elsewhere) in favor of providing air and naval support to allies who would provide the bulk of the ground forces. This led eventually to the “hollow military” of the late 1970s. President Reagan then rebuilt the military across the board. The Army was increased to 18 active divisions, the same number Truman was planning for the Army in 1952.

The Reagan expansion was fortunate because the next conflict was in the Persian Gulf where America’s allies, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, did not have the populations to field large ground armies. Simply providing air and naval support would not have defeated Iraq, which had one of the largest armies in the world. Nor have continued bombing raids on Iraq overthrown Saddam Hussein during the ten years since the XVIII Airborne and VII Corps were pulled back short of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. Indeed, aerial bombardment could not even coerce Iraq into continuing United Nations weapons inspections.

The notion that technological advances, in particular the range, payload and precision of airpower, have reduced the need for large armies was disproved once again in the Gulf War. Personnel deployed to Operation Desert Storm numbered 533,000 (427,000 active duty and 106,000 reservists). This was actually more than the peak strength of 440,000 deployed during the Korean War forty years earlier. In both wars, sizeable elements of eight U.S. ground combat divisions (Army and Marine) were in action.

The post-Cold War cuts in force levels and defense budgets were not slowed in the wake of the Gulf War. Many of the units which had displayed their valor and skills in overrunning the Iraqi army came home only to be disbanded. These cuts have been justified by what can be called the “black-box” theory that holds technology will allow troops to do more with less, and at a safe distance from the enemy. If it is no longer the B-36 and the H-bomb, then it’s the cruise missile and precision-guided munitions. This marked the fifth time since 1943 that this supposed trade-off was used as the basis for downsizing Army force structure.

The 2001 QDR will provide the Bush administration with the chance to rethink American strategy and what is needed to implement it. In the realm of conventional warfare, the issue is what mix of combined arms is best suited to project American power in ways that accomplish geopolitical goals.

The most likely reason the United States would become involved in a major regional war is to support the security of one or more allies. American forces may be able to operate “over the horizon,” but our local allies cannot. The objectives at issue are, by definition, in-theater. American forces must be there, too, and in sufficient strength to defend or seize the objectives and to take the war to the enemy in a decisive fashion—including removing the opposing regime, if need be, to establish a lasting peace. That means troops on the ground, as it has always meant.

The experience of the last fifty years cannot be ignored when crafting the 2001 QDR. Yet much of the preliminary discussion has focused on ways to reduce the size or capabilities of the ground force

component, usually by defining away missions that discussants find unpleasant—for example, the false dichotomy between preparing for theater wars or small-scale contingencies, as if U.S. interests will only be challenged in one dimension. The strategic assumption of the 1997 QDR, that the United States must be able to engage in both MTWs and SSCs while maintaining a reserve against additional threats, remains valid. The proper focus is how to fulfill these requirements, not how to avoid them. Experience indicates that an active Army of more than 10 divisions is required. Though 14–16 divisions, which is the force size most often recommended in the wake of combat, seems an impossible goal at present, any expansion—even of a few “interim” brigades—will prove a prudent investment within the next decade.

The Army must be able to field a balance of units effective in operations from the heavy to the light ends of the conflict spectrum. Some lighter-equipped units are needed for certain missions and as a rapid reaction/deterrent/vanguard force. At the same time, larger, heavier-equipped units also must be retained and capable of timely deployment.

The Army Transformation initiative undertaken by Army Chief of Staff General Eric K. Shinseki is designed to achieve just that. By reequipping a number of brigades with medium-weight armored vehicles and weapon systems, yet also retaining heavier armored units, the Army will be able to quickly deploy reinforcing units, increasing combat power. A 2001 QDR that imposes additional reductions on the already austere Army budget will force the Army to make dangerous trade-offs between deployability and combat power.

As the Combat Studies Institute of the Army Command and General Staff College concluded from its recent study of divisional transformation efforts since 1939, “Reorganizations that are intended to address austerity, be it a shrinking manpower pool or lack of strategic transport, run the grave risk of creating a structure that is deployable but not fightable . . . battle punishes divisions that are too austere.”⁷

The hard lesson of war has been that American divisions have always had to have their armor and artillery reinforced in combat in order to wage war “energetically and with severity,” which is, as Napoleon put it, the only true way to “make it shorter.”

T. R. Fehrenbach’s *This Kind of War*, one of the best books ever written on the nature of modern war, demonstrates the continuity of fundamental principles. First published 38 years ago, it has been reissued for the 50th anniversary of the Korean War. Fehrenbach knew military technology was always changing. His vision was in regard to what would endure. He wrote, “A modern infantry may ride sky vehicles into combat, fire and sense its weapons through instrumentation, employ devices of frightening lethality in the future—but it must also be old-fashioned enough to be iron-hard, poised for instant obedience, and prepared to die in the mud.”⁸ His timeless conclusion:

A nation that does not prepare for all the forms of war should then renounce the use of war in national policy. A people that does not prepare to fight should then be morally prepared to surrender. To fail to prepare soldiers and citizens for limited, bloody ground action, and then to engage in it, is folly verging on the criminal.

The danger is that the perceived political expectation of speed combined with a certain hubris about high technology will lead to the sending of troops into harm’s way without what they need to win, or maybe even survive. Saddam Hussein may have failed to send his armor against the 82d Airborne when it was rushed to Saudi Arabia in 1990, but the next opponent may be more bold.

If the 2001 QDR can base its analysis first and foremost on a realistic assessment of what it takes to decisively win modern wars, then the Army will do well. If the QDR goes down any other line of thought, then more than just the Army will suffer in the end.

Endnotes

1. National Defense Panel, *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century* (Arlington, Va.: National Defense Panel, 1997), p. 58.
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3. Cited in Maurice Matloff, “The 90-Division Gamble,” *Command Decisions*, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1990), p. 378.
4. William Mitchell, *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power—Economic and Military* (New York: Dover, 1988), p. 19.
5. Maurice A. Millan, *Tanks, Fighters & Ships: U.S. Conventional Force Planning Since WW II* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 1989), p. 79.
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8. T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 656.

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