

# THE USE OF FORCE IN OUR TIME

BY A. J. BACEVICH

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*America's victory in the Persian Gulf War seemed a resounding confirmation of conventional U.S. military thought. Yet to cope with a world in which terrorists and warlords pose as great a challenge as massed armies, a radical revision of military thinking is essential.*

Every nation is caught in the moral paradox of refusing to go to war unless it can be proved that the national interest is imperiled, and of continuing in the war only by proving that something much more than national interest is at stake.

—Reinhold Niebuhr,  
*The Irony of American History* (1952)

When the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote these words, the Cold War—a crisis in international politics touching virtually every aspect of American life—was at its height. Yet the source of the paradox that Niebuhr referred to was not so much political as military. It derived less from the East-West confrontation than from profound changes in the character of warfare, changes that predated by several decades the Cold War itself. The

paradox in which the United States found itself caught in the 1950s was a product of what the historian Walter Millis labeled “the hypertrophy of war.” A series of changes in warfare had plunged the military profession into a prolonged crisis. An understanding of that crisis—and the military’s efforts to evade its implications—is an essential point of departure for understanding today’s controversies surrounding the use of force.

To Niebuhr and other observers, the conflicts of 1914–18 and 1939–45 had demonstrated with awful clarity that war in the 20th century had become “total.” This transformation of war was the product of several converging developments. Advanced societies had evolved vast capabilities to marshal human, industrial, and financial resources for military purposes. The collaboration of soldiers, scientists, and engineers had produced new weapons of extraordinary destructive power. Military staffs had devised techniques for bringing awesome



*Confusion reigns as gunfire erupts on a Port Au Prince street. Some 6,000 U.S. troops are in Haiti under Operation Maintain Democracy, one of many unconventional missions now assigned the U.S. military.*

accumulations of materiel to bear on the battlefield. Yet these impressive achievements had yielded precious little of political value. Although it was a staggering event, the bombing of Hiroshima merely punctuated what already seemed evident: that war as an instrument of reasoned policy had reached a dead end. War had become too destructive to wage.

Thus by the time Niebuhr wrote, with the world divided into two hostile camps, each brandishing nuclear weapons, traditional conventions of Great Power politics no longer provided adequate guidance on the proper role of force in regulating international affairs. When the slightest miscalculation might upset the precarious global equilibrium and touch off World War III, only the most important national purposes, involving true vital interests, could justify the use of force. "In the face of the horrors of nuclear war," speculated Henry Kissinger in one of the decade's most influ-

ential books, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), "perhaps force has ceased to be an instrument of policy save for the most naked issue of national survival."

**Y**et wars were still fought in the peripheral regions of the world. Although constrained from employing the full weight of their military might, the larger powers found themselves ineluctably drawn into such conflicts—American involvement in the Korean "police action" being a case in point. On those occasions when advanced democracies did engage in protracted conflict, mere national interests could hardly suffice to justify the costs incurred: the havoc wreaked as a by-product of modern military campaigns, the suffering of combatants and noncombatants alike, and the resort to morally objectionable methods in the pursuit of victory. The longer and more

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brutal the war, the more exalted became the purposes it allegedly served. Thus, for example, in Korea and in Indochina—both theaters of war when Niebuhr wrote—Western belligerents attempted to vindicate their conduct by citing purposes that transcended the mere *raison d'état*. During the second Indochina War this was to be even more the case. Indeed, as representatives of a nation that had fought one world war in order to “end all wars” and “make the world safe for democracy,” and whose participation in a second signified the triumph of the ideals informing the first, American political leaders were particularly given to such exercises in national self-justification.

## II

If the threat of Armageddon through much of this century has vastly complicated the statesman's problem of when and how to use force, soldiers have for the most part tried gamely to carry on as if nothing fundamental has changed. Military professionals have attempted to evade Niebuhr's paradox, rejecting or minimizing the implications of total war.

They could hardly be expected to do otherwise. After all, the autonomy and institutional authority of the military profession and the status and self-esteem of its members depend upon arrangements very much at odds with Niebuhr's paradox. Those arrangements rest on three essential assumptions. The first is that the international system—“the world”—is composed of competing nation-states, each possessing unambiguous sovereignty. According to the second, the ultimate mechanism for making adjustments to that system and for preventing its breakdown is war, conducted between nation-states in compliance with certain recognized rules. The third is that ac-

cess to the coercive means needed to wage war is permitted only to national elites (of which soldiers form an integral part).

The century has not dealt kindly with these propositions. Since World War I, sovereignty has been progressively circumscribed. Deference to supranational authority has constrained nation-states, and even the Great Powers, from acting in pursuit of their own immediate interests. In addition, the lines that traditionally demarcated war as a realm of activity have broken down. As conflict has assumed devastating new forms, the distinctions between politics and war, between combatants and noncombatants, and between what is legitimate and what is impermissible in the conduct of warfare have become increasingly blurred. Nor have national elites succeeded in maintaining their monopoly over the machinery of war. Instead, subversives, terrorists, partisans, guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and self-proclaimed revolutionaries have usurped the state's control over the instruments of violence.

For the better part of the century, hide-bound soldiers—and even the experience of total war at first hand could not guarantee a cure for incorrigible obstinacy—have insisted that war has not changed, that hallowed precepts of military practice should remain unaltered. Yet other soldiers, the clever ones, have sensed that war is indeed being transformed. Furthermore, they understand the imperative of devising a response in order to prevent their vocation from becoming obsolete.

In the aftermath of World War I, the cleverest and most perceptive soldiers by far were the Germans. For the German officer corps, the catastrophe of 1918 was not simply that Germany had suffered a great defeat but that the German army had failed demonstrably to fulfill the task that justified its elevated status within German society: securing the decisive victory that would

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*A. J. Bacevich is executive director of the Foreign Policy Institute at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. Copyright © 1995 by A. J. Bacevich.*

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resolve the political crisis of Europe to Germany's permanent advantage. Demonstrated repeatedly over the course of four crippling years of war, this failure had in the end unleashed a host of dangerous social forces that during the 1920s and '30s jeopardized values and institutions cherished by the German military caste.

As historian Michael Geyer argues, the imperative to stabilize the social order and uphold its own privileged place within that order provided the true stimulus for the German military's outpouring of innovation and creativity during the interwar decades. It was this implicitly counterrevolutionary agenda rather than the narrow technical problem of breaking the stalemate of trench warfare that motivated German military reformers such as General Hans von Seeckt (1866–1936). The central intellectual problem confronting the officer corps of the interwar period, notes Geyer, was to devise ways "to limit war in order to make it, once again . . . purposeful and instrumental." By restoring the possibility of rapid decision achieved at tolerable cost, the German army would once again "make war feasible," thus preserving its own status and prerogatives within German society as well.

**T**he world would come to know the results of these labors as "blitzkrieg." Yet despite a succession of dazzling operational performances beginning in 1939, the methods devised by German military reformers failed. Instead of limiting war and making it purposeful, German reforms laid the basis for a conflict even more horrible than that of 1914–18. Once again, war jumped the neat institutional boundaries to which military professionals sought to confine it. Once again, the search for that single decisive stroke that would produce ultimate victory—a modern Cannae—eluded the best efforts of generals and their staffs. Once again, war became a matter of indiscriminate slaughter, encompassing whole societ-

ies and devouring combatants and noncombatants alike. Once again, the sheer dimensions and duration of the conflict gave rise to political and social forces that altered the existing order in ways neither foreseen nor desired by reigning elites on either side.

Despite this second recurrence of total war in a quarter-century, the military profession (in the countries where it survived) remained steadfast in insisting that the principles of traditional military practice had not outlived their usefulness. In an age when the prerogatives of sovereignty were repeatedly challenged and progressively diminished, when weapons of mass destruction continued to proliferate despite their manifest uselessness in waging war, when the failure of national elites to restrict access to instruments of violence became undeniable and perhaps irreversible, and when real wars time and again exposed the limits of military orthodoxy—throughout this age, professional soldiers persisted in their quest to restore "institutionally contained warfare between armed forces," thereby reversing the revolution set in motion by the onset of total war.

### III

In the aftermath of World War II, overall responsibility for the restoration of the older idea of war devolved upon the nation that had inherited the mantle of world's leading military power: the United States. From our vantage point in the 1990s, it may appear that American soldiers were at first slow to take up the challenge. Lacking the stimulus of defeat that motivated the Germans during the interwar period, American military thinking from the late 1940s into the 1960s was lackluster. It derived less from sustained engagement with the implications of total war than from obstinate parochialism and fierce interservice rivalry.

Many will recall this period as a golden age of impressively original American

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thinking about war. But the innovators were civilian "defense intellectuals," not soldiers, and their preoccupation was averting wars, not fighting them. By comparison with the sophisticated contours of the civilians' deterrence theory, the nuclear "warfighting" scenarios created by military professionals appear crude and simplistic. The army's ill-conceived "Pentomic" experiment of the 1950s, for example, called for the fielding of whole new families of nuclear weapons but sought to fit them into the framework of traditional campaigns and battles. Indeed, American civilian leaders never showed much interest in the military's doctrinal excursions, indulging them only to the extent that they might add credibility to America's deterrent posture by showing that the nation's professional soldiers were undaunted by the prospect of fighting World War III.

President John F. Kennedy's fascination with counterinsurgency and nation building in the early 1960s stands as the exception to this civilian indifference, but it was an exception that ill-served the cause of military professionalism. The premise underlying counterinsurgency doctrine as it developed during the late 1950s and early '60s was that by supplementing existing routines with a smattering of novel technique, conventional military institutions could deal with the noxious "brushfire wars" that had become increasingly commonplace after World War II in places such as Malaya, the Philippines, and Indochina. That premise proved to be false. Instead of allowing soldiers to expand the reach of professional competency, the flirtation with counterinsurgency paved the way for the disaster of the Vietnam War.

**V**ietnam made it impossible for American soldiers to sustain the pretense that all was well with their profession. So-called strategic weapons, developed at enormous ex-

pense during the 1950s and '60s, were largely irrelevant to the problem at hand, and even "tactical" nuclear weapons, if their use had been politically possible, offered little prospect of meaningful operational effect. Concepts of conventional war found no ready application: there were no enemy field armies to encircle, no battle fleets to destroy, no vital industrial centers to bombard.

Nothing remained but to engage the enemy on his own terms, waging unconventional war with forces not specifically tailored to the task. This American extemporizing produced a harvest of tactical successes, a hugely gratifying development to those managing the Vietnam War. After all, such minor victories provided the stuff from which even greater success at the operational and strategic levels could be constructed—at least that was the lesson of earlier wars. The art of generalship lay in marshaling tactical successes so as to win battles and campaigns. Yet in Vietnam this was the problem that stymied senior commanders. What was the operational significance of a dozen scattered firefights, of ambushes and patrols, of firebases defended, of weapons captured and bodies counted? No one knew. Despite the expenditure of American blood and treasure on an ever more lavish scale, American soldiers found themselves fighting a war of attrition that they could not win. As had been the case in the trenches of World War I's Western Front, the sergeants and the captains did their job well enough; the generals failed utterly in theirs.

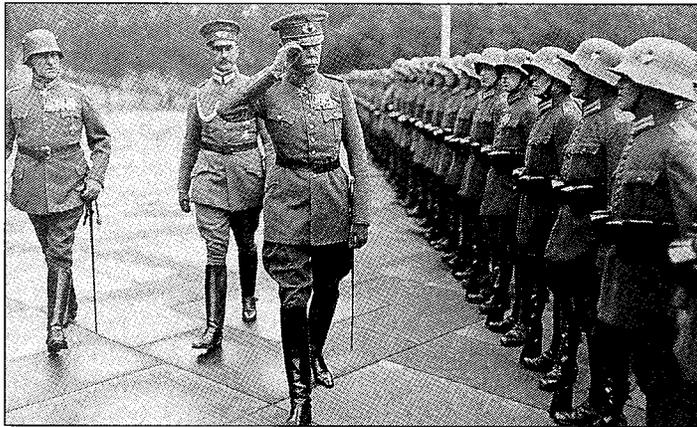
To be sure, no sooner had the futility of American efforts become undeniable than efforts commenced to absolve the generals of blame for defeat. American soldiers had fought the war under absurd restrictions that condemned them to failure, it was said. The generals' hands had been tied by civilian political appointees: the McGeorge Bundys and Walt Rostows, Robert McNamara and the Whiz Kids

running roughshod over the Pentagon brass, all the bright but naive Ivy Leaguers who had responded to JFK's summons. The responsibility for defeat in Vietnam belonged to those civilians. Yet at no time during this long war did such restrictions move any senior officer to resign in protest. To the very end they soldiered on, collecting medals and promotions, bidding their weary subordinates to persevere in a struggle that had long since lost all purpose.

Furthermore, as with Germany's defeat in World War I, the political and social dimensions of the crisis provoked by Vietnam loomed at least as large as the military-technical ones. Although it was a conflict waged on a far smaller scale than the war of 1914-18, Vietnam took on some of the qualities of total war, engaging whole societies and producing aftershocks that reverberated through virtually every quarter of American life. Besides nearly ripping apart the American political system, the war generated long-term changes that soldiers could only view as inimical to the well-being of their profession.

**A**nxious to "reconcile" and to "heal old wounds," Americans today seek to smooth the rough edges of memory about Vietnam. But in the collective psyche of incumbent military leaders the rough edges remain. Understanding their perspective is impossible without first recalling the way the world looked to them 20 years ago, when they were subalterns recently returned from a failed and bitter war.

In those days, the national landscape as viewed from inside the American military could hardly have looked more de-



*Attempting to make conventional war quicker and less costly, General Hans von Seeckt radically redesigned the German army between 1920 and '26.*

pressing. Vietnam had legitimized mass resistance to war and to military service. To have protested and refused to fight was recognized as a sign of enlightenment, a view that persists even today, albeit with some ambivalence, in influential sectors of society. Many of those who had fought and who remained in the post-Vietnam military felt shunned and unappreciated. Soldiers nursed a smoldering grudge against the news media, blaming biased and sanctimonious reporters for puncturing the image of the American fighting man as selfless patriot, casting him instead as either a dupe or an accomplice in war crimes. Although seldom voiced openly, a deep-seated cynicism about politics and a contempt for politicians imbued the officer corps that came home from Vietnam. The officers felt that they had been used and betrayed by civilian elites. As a result, the war left in its wake an unhealthy residue of civil-military distrust. Even more broadly, the war served as catalyst for a cultural explosion, giving rise to changes that soldiers instinctively viewed as antithetical to their ethos. Expectations that the military should somehow accommodate itself to the agenda of Black Power, feminism, gay liberation, and the cult of the imperial self provoked dismay and resentment.

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#### IV

Yet to its everlasting credit, the military wasted little time feeling sorry for itself. The American defeat in Vietnam, much like Germany's humiliation in 1918, soon produced a period of intense introspection and spectacular creativity. As with the German response, this American reform effort, ostensibly rooted in military-technical issues, had its wellsprings in the imperative of responding to the larger institutional crisis that defeat had brought to a head. The overriding task in the 1970s paralleled the one that German officers had faced a half-century earlier: re-establishing a basis for military professionalism by affirming that war as an extension of politics remained the special province of a warrior caste that could rightfully claim a distinctive status within society.

**I**n one critical respect, however, the German and American responses differed. German military reform evolved within the narrow strategic framework defined by Germany's position in the heart of Europe. This setting obliged German soldiers to pursue professional rehabilitation by refighting the war they had lost. Working within the spacious strategic parameters permitted a truly global power, American military professionals felt no similar compunction to devise solutions to the problems of counterinsurgency (solutions that inevitably would have collided with the canons of military orthodoxy). For American officers, the starting point for retrieving their professional legitimacy lay in avoiding altogether future campaigns even remotely similar to Vietnam. Among German soldiers after World War I, the Western Front that had cost them so dearly became an obsession; their aim was to get it right the next time. With only a few exceptions, American soldiers evinced little

interest in refighting the last war. Even those who were willing to revisit the conflict joined in the unanimous conclusion: never again.

Yet in another sense, the American search for professional redemption after Vietnam did mirror the German experience. In both cases, the aim was inherently counterrevolutionary: to restore limits and boundaries to war, so that outcomes would be determined by the clash of opposing armies, not the mobilization of entire societies. American soldiers would have to convince a public and elites scarred by Vietnam that war did not necessarily mean costly stalemate—the notorious “quagmire.” They would have to demonstrate the feasibility of achieving decision at tolerable cost and without widespread collateral damage and incidental slaughter. The element of *time* was critical. Vietnam had convinced American soldiers that modern democracy's capacity to withstand the strains of war was severely limited. In any conflict in which success was not soon forthcoming, popular impatience might lead to the withdrawal of support, with devastating consequences for the war's outcome and for those who fought. Therefore, an overriding imperative in future conflicts was to win quickly. The corollary was equally important: conflicts in which the prospect of early decision appeared problematic were to be avoided at all costs.

In short, the officer corps that came home from Southeast Asia devoted precious little energy to dissecting the war that it had just endured. Doing so would have advanced the cause of professional revival minimally, if at all. Rather, soldiers threw themselves headlong into an effort to restore the possibility of decision-oriented warfare directed by military elites—an effort undertaken in the face of skeptics (mostly on the political Left) persuaded by Hiroshima on the one hand and Vietnam on the other that all war had be-

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come an exercise in futility.

The bind to which these critics pointed was a real one. The post-Vietnam American military attempted to escape it by reasserting the existence—indeed, the primacy—of conflict in the zone between all-out nuclear war on the one hand and unconventional war on the other hand, between apocalypse and people's war. Nor was it absurd to claim that such a zone existed. The unfolding military history of the modern Middle East provided examples that were as instructive as they were fortuitous.

Even as the agony of Vietnam played itself out, the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 reminded American military officers how wars were supposed to be fought: warrior pitted against warrior in a contest whose stakes, military as well as political, were straightforward and unambiguous; commanders empowered to command and backed by political leaders who refrained from operational meddling; civilian populations that were spared direct involvement as belligerents but that had no difficulty determining whose side they were on. Best of all, these wars ended within a matter of days with an outcome that was unequivocal. In the performance of the Israeli Defense Forces, and in the IDF's status within Israeli society, American soldiers found inspiration for their own recovery.

The problem was one of adapting the style of warfare practiced by the Israelis to fit American strategic requirements. For the United States, the "threat" was not Arabs but the Soviet empire. The critical battlefield was not the desert. It was certainly not the jungle or rice paddy. It was the "Central Region," the expanse of industrialized and democratic Europe extending from Denmark south to Switzerland, from the Iron Curtain west to the Atlantic ports. By re-establishing itself as a force that with its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies could win

handily any face-off against the Warsaw Pact, the American military establishment might begin to undo the effects of Vietnam. Even without fighting—indeed, the overriding criterion of success was to prevent a fight—the American military profession could recover the stature and legitimacy lost in Southeast Asia.

Thus disposed, most American officers came to regard the Vietnam War less as a defeat than as a digression from real soldiering, as lost years during which the United States fell behind the Soviet Union. Beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing through the 1980s, the Soviet "other" provided both focus and a sense of urgency to their campaign of military revitalization. Leaving few parts of the armed forces untouched, this effort manifested itself most prominently in the realm of doctrine, particularly in the AirLand Battle Doctrine unveiled by the army in 1982 and formally endorsed by the air force as well. AirLand Battle provided the blueprint according to which outnumbered U.S. forces would turn back a full-scale non-nuclear Warsaw Pact attack, relying on superior technology, superior training, and superior personnel to compensate for the enemy's greater numbers.

**T**he Cold War's unexpected end meant that this plan would never be tested in battle. But it turned out that even a Battle of Western Europe might not have provided that test: war plans acquired from the former East Germany show that the Warsaw Pact intended to employ nuclear weapons on a mass scale at the outset of an attack. One of the most critical assumptions informing the vision of AirLand Battle had been wrong all along.

Yet even though the demise of the Warsaw Pact came not with a bang but with a whimper, the hosts designed to defend Europe from attack did have their day in battle. In one of the great ironies of

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military history, forces made redundant by the end of the Cold War and soon to be disestablished were handed the reprieve of one final mission.

No war is to be welcomed. But if the United States was destined to fight a war in the Persian Gulf, the timing of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait could not have been more opportune. The American-led response to this act of naked aggression culminated in an extraordinarily one-sided victory. The strategic consequences of that triumph continue to ripple throughout the Middle East. No less important, Operation Desert Storm quickly turned American thinking about war upside down. President George Bush and others concluded that the nation had at long last kicked the Vietnam syndrome. The war's neat convergence of national interest and international morality combined with an awesome display of military prowess (and extremely low casualties) fed increased popular expectations about what American power and leadership might accomplish in shaping the post-Cold War world. And although some theorists glimpsed in Desert Storm the outlines of yet another profound revolution in military affairs—a revolution driven by technology that promised to change the very nature of war—soldiers saw it as validating the reforms of the previous 15 years. By liberating a small desert oligarchy from the clutches of a ham-handed aggressor possessed of a large army but no nuclear weapons, they had reasserted the pre-eminence of "real war." In this sense, Desert Storm seemed to signal the long-sought redemption of military professionalism.

## V

And so for the United States at least, Desert Storm seemed to herald a release from Niebuhr's paradox. To soldiers, it

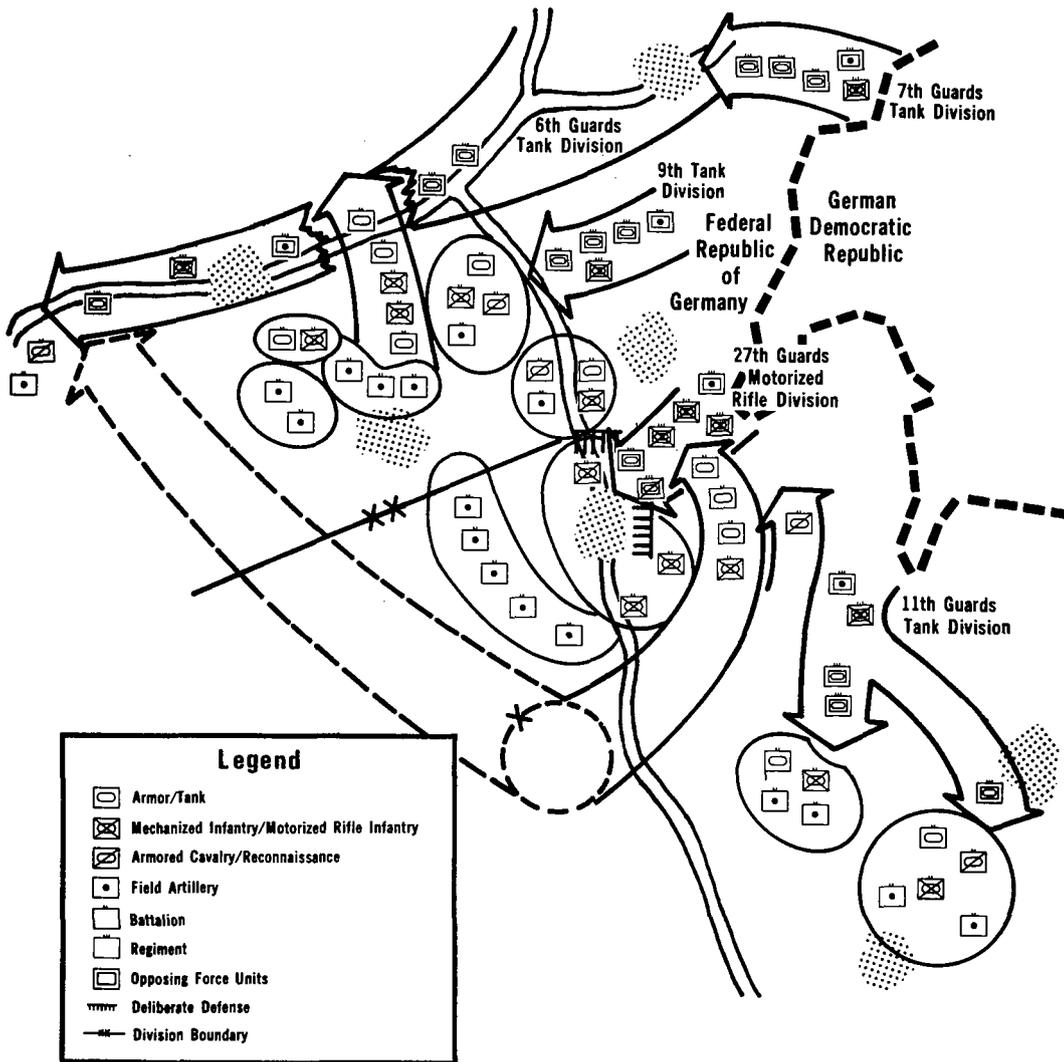
promised an end to the long crisis of their profession. Yet subsequent events have dashed all such hopes.

Rather than bring about an age of harmony, the end of the Cold War gave way to an era in which confrontation and conflict promise to be endemic. Although mostly small-scale and seldom posing a direct threat to American security, post-Cold War military crises such as those in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and North Korea have proven impossible to ignore. Furthermore, despite America's overwhelming military power, these crises have defied ready solution.

To be sure, none of them have yet culminated in full-fledged disaster for the United States. Yet when one recalls the confidence and renewed sense of purpose presumed to form part of the legacy of the Persian Gulf War, the difficulty experienced by the United States in bringing its power to bear on these lesser problems is striking. Despite agonizing that has been protracted and almost embarrassingly public, consensus on questions of purpose, means, and method has remained beyond the reach of American policymakers and their military advisers. At the pinnacle of its military superiority, the United States has seemingly drifted once again into a state of confusion about when and under what circumstances to employ force.

In short, it has become increasingly apparent that the end of the Cold War and victory in Desert Storm have not allowed the United States to escape from the implications of Niebuhr's paradox after all. At most, the end of the Cold War has turned that paradox inside out. Once only vital national interests could justify a decision to employ force. Expectations prompted by victory in the Gulf changed that. The perception that American military power might with minimal risk be employed to serve "something much more than" the nation's immediate inter-

## US Counterattack



*During the 1970s and '80s, American military planners energetically developed and refined plans for the defense of Central Europe. This 1983 scenario involves Germany's Fulda Gap and Hessian Corridor.*

ests seemed to oblige the United States to make that effort. The illusion of unchallengeable military superiority magnified the call of conscience. In some instances—the rescue of the Kurds, the intervention in Somalia, and the peaceful occupation of Haiti are examples—conscience impelled intervention in the near-total absence of substantive national interests.

Formerly, according to Niebuhr, once

a nation found itself militarily engaged, leaders groped for larger purposes to justify and sustain the commitment they had made. Today, the admirable objectives that provide a compelling argument for going in may not suffice to justify staying. Americans want to do good in the world, but their willingness to pay for doing good is limited, especially if payment is demanded in American lives. Once the

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bullets have begun to fly and it becomes apparent that success may involve substantial costs, the larger purposes that inspired the decision to intervene lose their resonance. The ensuing debate over how long to sustain a commitment reverts to the question of whether doing so contributes directly to the well-being of the United States. Failure by responsible officials to answer that question in the affirmative undermines popular and political support for an operation. An enterprise that yesterday seemed expedient is today not worth the blood of a single American soldier. In the case of Somalia, such thinking led the United States to abandon its commitment altogether. In the *Harlan County* incident in Haiti, it aborted a mission barely under way. So the bind identified by Niebuhr in 1952 has reasserted itself in a somewhat altered form. Its effects remain the same: despite an abundance of available military power, the obstacles confronting efforts to translate that power into political advantage are seemingly insurmountable.

## VI

But why is this the case? With the Cold War now history, with Desert Storm as a recent model of how to use power effectively, why is American military policy once again so apparently ineffectual? The interpretation most frequently advanced by critics is the political one: responsibility for bootless U.S. policies can be traced directly to an irresolute leader and the maladroit advisers who serve him. But that explanation is incomplete, if not altogether misleading.

Rather, the limited utility of American military power stems in no small measure from the persistent limitations of professional orthodoxy. In an officer corps buoyed by success in the Gulf but still haunted by memories of Vietnam, that

orthodoxy has if anything entrenched itself more deeply. Adversaries as different as Mohammed Farah Aidid and Radovan Karadzic have all too readily grasped the opportunities implicit in that fact. No doubt they respect the American military establishment for its formidable strengths. They are also shrewd enough to circumvent those strengths and to exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in the rigid American adherence to professional conventions regarding the use of force.

**N**one of this is new and most of it is unavoidable. As I suggested earlier, the abiding theme of 20th-century military history is that the changing character of modern war long ago turned the flank of conventional military practice, limiting its application to an ever narrowing spectrum of contingencies. Despite expectations to the contrary, Desert Storm did not reverse that trend. Nor is the revolution in military affairs to which Desert Storm supposedly pointed likely to do so in the future. On the contrary, as the predicaments posed by Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and North Korea suggest, the military history of the post-Cold War era is likely to continue to evolve along the lines of the past several decades.

Unlike the brazen "criminal trespass" that made Iraq such a choice villain in the Persian Gulf, political violence after the Cold War only infrequently takes the form of one state directly victimizing another. Three of the four cases cited above involved some variant of internal conflict. In the fourth case, a state desperate to make up for its own failings has employed nuclear threats to extort concessions from the international community. Yet even in this instance, North Korea has carefully refrained from overt aggression.

In other words, when political disputes turn violent, seldom does the nexus of conflict take the form of one sovereign entity directly violating another. So long as this is

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true, the concept of Major Regional Contingencies (MRC), featured in the Clinton administration's Bottom-Up Review of defense as the supposed template for future American military operations, will rarely prove useful. Indeed, none of the four cases cited above have served to validate this planning tool. Perhaps this should not be surprising. Although dressed up in postindustrial garb, the MRC is an attempt to revive a model of limited war more suited to an 18th-century system of international politics than to our own.

Implicit in the MRC model is the expectation of U.S. forces operating in pursuit of clearly defined purposes, waging campaigns of limited duration, and relying on the high-tech weaponry that is the American strong suit. Yet the varied military crises of the past two years have repeatedly frustrated such expectations. Local conditions have undermined efforts to translate political aims into crisp military objectives. What was the mission in Somalia? To feed the starving? To rebuild a failed state? To get General Aidid? Urged to add peacekeeping and peacemaking to their repertoire of missions, professional soldiers bridle, perhaps catching a whiff of rice paddy or triple-canopy jungle. Such missions raise the specter of open-ended commitments under circumstances in which every other party involved possesses the ability to extend the quarrel indefinitely while no one possesses the capacity to bring it to a conclusion.

Nor have circumstances on the ground—whether actual as in Somalia or prospective as in Bosnia—accommodated the preferred American operational style. Mountainous terrain and crowded cities do not facilitate the effective employment of ultra-expensive, precision-guided munitions. The intermixing of combatants with non-combatants confronts U.S. regulars with the unwelcome prospect of once more fighting adversaries who are undistinguishable from their surroundings—and of being saddled

with the blame for the civilian casualties that are a by-product of fighting in such circumstances. Even in North Korea, arguably the most clearcut military problem with which the United States has wrestled of late, Pyongyang's shadowy nuclear capability has vastly complicated efforts to define operational concepts that are feasible and make sense politically. As Roger Molander, military analyst and former member of the U.S. National Security Council staff, has commented, North Korea suggests that, with the possible exception of Iraq, the non-nuclear MRC may already be a myth.

For reasons such as these, American military leaders have in case after case stood in the forefront of those arguing against direct U.S. military intervention. In a sense, this is not unusual: soldiers are habitually reluctant interventionists. Yet their specific objections—the difficulty of translating political purpose into clear military objectives (Somalia and Bosnia), the lack of a precisely defined operational endpoint (Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti), the prospect of conflict involving nuclear weapons (Korea), the risk of casualties beyond a level acceptable to American opinion (almost anywhere)—emphasize the point that the conditions permitting effective military action in the Persian Gulf were the exception rather than the rule. In short, if military professionals saw Desert Storm as restoring “real war” to pride of place, subsequent efforts to apply that experience to the problems of a turbulent world have foundered. The long crisis of military professionalism continues unabated.

## VII

The point of emphasizing the enduring nature of this crisis of military professionalism is not to condemn or belittle the efforts of those in uniform who wrestle with it. If soldiers cling stubbornly to the

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premises that have defined the essence of their calling, they are behaving in ways that are predictably human. How could it be otherwise? Indeed, an appreciation of the dilemma that soldiers face should temper expectations about how far existing military institutions can be stretched to incorporate unorthodox conditions. Americans may properly insist that their military attempt to adapt itself to new circumstances, but they should do so with the understanding that only modest change will occur. They may ask why the nation's vast military capabilities are so seldom relevant to the actual sources of upheaval in the world, but they should not expect their queries, objections, or complaints to have more than modest effect. Given the framework of military professional orthodoxy, reinforced by the American experience of the past 25 years, the range of circumstances in which U.S. military power is likely to find application will remain narrow. No amount of railing against senior officers for their perceived timidity is likely to change that. Nor is foisting some new weapon system on the military or demanding changes in doctrine or force structure. Nor will any so-called revolution in military affairs provide any near-term remedy.

**T**hose who would nudge the military toward accepting a somewhat wider range of contingencies need to find ways to reassure soldiers that such departures from strict orthodoxy will not put the status and prestige of the military at high risk. To accomplish that, political leaders and others must encourage Americans to shed unrealistic expectations about the near-term political payoff of even the most successful military operations. When Somalia or Rwanda collapses, military intervention can establish conditions that permit humanitarian operations to proceed. But no military action can create or restore functioning societies. When Haiti

falls victim to military thuggery, the perpetrators can be deposed through military intervention and duly elected officials can be restored to power. But military action cannot democratize a nation in which few of the prerequisites of democracy exist.

Americans must also be disabused of the notion, vastly reinforced by the fabulous success of Desert Storm, that technology is sanitizing war or paving the way for an era when technologically advanced countries such as the United States will employ the military instrument bloodlessly. With rare exceptions, the effective use of force will almost invariably carry with it a substantial risk of American casualties. Indeed, a capacity for absorbing casualties provides one measure of a nation's military credibility.

Any new attitude toward the use of force will thus require a few modest steps toward the de-sentimentalization of the American soldier. The United States should never send its warriors in harm's way without good reason. It should train them well and arm them with the best available equipment. It should honor their sacrifices. It should mourn their loss when they fall in battle. But if the United States intends to be taken seriously as a world power, the death of American soldiers—volunteers and professionals all—should not in and of itself lead the nation to reverse or abandon stated policy. Americans need not worry that their military leaders will treat cavalierly the lives of those placed in their charge. By conveying their own realistic appreciation that the use of force entails the likelihood of casualties and that the loss of a single rifleman does not necessarily constitute unacceptable calamity, Americans will encourage the military itself to evaluate the potential use of force without inordinate anxiety about the impact of casualties on public support for its mission and status.

By coaxing American military leaders into becoming marginally more responsive to the world as it is, such changes in public

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attitudes might for a time enable the United States to use its military power more effectively. But adjustments of this sort would provide at most a temporary palliative, merely postponing the final resolution of the century-long crisis of military orthodoxy.

**C**linging to orthodoxy will in the end only undermine the special status and prestige of the military which that orthodoxy is designed in part to protect. For the moment, in the lingering afterglow of Desert Storm, the American public feels little eagerness to peer behind the imposing facade of military professionalism. The abiding appeal of military pomp and display, the allure of war machines as testimonials to national strength and ingenuity, and perhaps above all the reservoir of esteem and affection for the mythical G.I.—all of these and more maintain the public's inclination to accept the status quo. Yet no amount of popular esteem can sustain the facade indefinitely. If nothing else, the unfolding history of our era will see to that. Each time the United States submits to nuclear extortion (having established the precedent with North Korea), each time terrorists successfully penetrate American cities and take American lives, each time professional soldiers respond to episodes of ethnic cleansing or genocide by declaring such problems outside their brief, a few more of the citizens who pay so dearly to uphold their country's status as the World's Only Superpower will venture to ask what they are getting for their money. Such doubts will erode—and may eventually demolish—the public's support for military professionalism as it exists today.

Faced with such erosion, military lead-

ers will awaken to the unwisdom of blanket opposition to missions that fail to conform to their own preferences and priorities. As a device to shore up public trust and confidence, they may feel obliged to accept an incrementally greater role in such undertakings as multilateral peacekeeping or drug interdiction. Yet reluctant acceptance of nontraditional missions that is not accompanied by thoroughgoing institutional change carries risks of its own. As has often been the case with past efforts at half-hearted improvisation, the chief risk is one of failure—to the detriment of the nation as well as the military's own agenda.

**T**he expectation that traditional military thinking and traditional military practice can satisfy the requirements of the United States in the 21st century is a delusion. Yet devising workable substitutes remains a challenge. That soldiers themselves may yet summon the vision to adapt their ideas and institutions to the requirements of this new era—even at the cost of giving up their traditional definition of what it means to be a military professional—remains a possibility. But it is a remote one. It is more likely that a renewal of American military thought will be the work of people outside the military but able to view the soldier's dilemma with sympathy. Given the weight of the traditions with which they must contend, the reformers' task will be a huge one, demanding creativity and even genius. It will require a grand-scale rethinking of war, the use of force, and military purpose. Yet it is not too much to say that American security and even the survival of American democracy may hinge on the success of their efforts.