

## LIMITS ON THE USE OF AMERICAN MILITARY POWER

*by Samuel F. Wells, Jr.*

"You can't send soldiers off to war without having the support of the American people," Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer told newsmen just before retiring last June. "I think that's one of the great lessons that comes out of Vietnam."

Meyer urged "a face-to-face discussion between the President and the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and the military as to what the hell they want us to do" before the White House sends troops off to fight in Central America, or elsewhere.

A Vietnam veteran, America's top soldier was voicing the "never again" sentiment that has permeated the officer corps since 1973: no U.S. military intervention abroad without a decisive strategy and an unequivocal congressional mandate. A clearcut U.S. strategy will be hard to achieve—in good part because Congress, in its present mood, is unlikely to give the White House a mandate for action anywhere, short of World War III. In brief, President Ronald Reagan enjoys much less freedom of action than did Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1965, when he sent the first Marine units to Vietnam. The 1973 War Powers Act, for instance, bars presidential dispatch of troops abroad for more than 90 days without congressional approval; the House of Representatives has sought to prevent Reagan from giving covert aid to rebel groups attempting to overthrow the Soviet-supported, anti-American Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Indeed, Congress, fearing "another Vietnam," has sharply curbed U.S. efforts to assist, with money and advisers, the lackluster El Salvadoran regime's economic and military campaign against 6,000 Marxist-led guerrillas. And, in so doing, Congress may be bringing on the very dilemma it (and the White House) wants to avoid: sending in U.S. combat troops or accepting a guerrilla victory in America's backyard.

More broadly, what has also changed since the early 1960s is that America's military capabilities do not match its diplomatic commitments overseas, notably in the Middle East.

In January 1980, President Jimmy Carter stated that the United States would intervene "with any means necessary, including military force," to repel any "attempt by any outside

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force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region." Responding to the Khomeini revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter created the Rapid Deployment Force (actually a new designation for already existing home-based Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine units) to protect the area stretching from the Horn of Africa to Egypt and Pakistan. In the same spirit, Congress revived draft registration (but not draft call-ups). Yet the ability of U.S. forces to protect American interests in this vast region remains questionable—for a variety of reasons.

First, although the likeliest current threats to U.S. security—in the Persian Gulf and Central America—are nonnuclear, the forces designed to meet them are usually underfunded and hence left in a state of relatively low readiness. Most U.S. troops overseas are stationed in Western Europe, regarded as the most crucial "front," but, thanks to the nuclear deterrent, the least likely scene of hostilities.\*

For most of the postwar era, its nuclear superiority gave the United States the edge in any major showdown with its prime adversary, the Soviet Union, notably in the 1962 Cuban missile affair. It also permitted Washington and its allies to maintain far smaller ground forces than did the Soviets. This "age of cheap security" finally ended around 1970, as the Russians won nuclear parity; but by then, other factors, notably the drawn-out Vietnam War, had revived the popular American aversion to large conventional forces in peacetime.

The Vietnam War, of course, is the central episode in the development of U.S. defense policy since 1945. Most analysts now agree that the Vietnam conflict was the first war in U.S. history that the armed forces were materially prepared to fight, and where American troops won every major battle. And yet, North

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\*The 19 active U.S. Army and Marine divisions, each with 15,000–18,500 men at full strength, would be hard pressed to meet NATO and other overseas commitments. Four divisions are in West Germany and three in the Pacific; six in the U.S. are pledged to reinforce NATO. The Rapid Deployment Force can call upon another four-and-one-third divisions, leaving only one-and-two-thirds uncommitted divisions. Fifty-nine of the U.S. Navy's 63 amphibious ships scattered from Okinawa to the Mediterranean would be needed to transport a single division overseas. The only pool upon which the Pentagon could draw to fight any prolonged "small" war, without over-committing its active forces, would be the nine divisions, 34 air transport squadrons, and 170 transport ships of the U.S. reserve forces.

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*Salvadoran officer candidates at Fort Benning, Georgia. More than 5,600 Salvadorans have been trained by U.S. advisers at Fort Benning, Fort Bragg, N.C., in Panama, and in El Salvador. Reagan has tried to use aid and diplomacy as a substitute for U.S. troops in Central America.*

Vietnam triumphed, primarily because President Johnson tried to "save South Vietnam" on the cheap. To avoid political attacks from Left or Right, Johnson variously refused to assess the true long-range costs and benefits of U.S. intervention, to seek explicit congressional approval, to sacrifice his Great Society programs to the needs of the war, to frame a decisive strategy, to mobilize the reserves, or to prepare the American public for a long, costly struggle. This intellectual and moral confusion in Washington soon led to demoralization and division across the country, exacerbated by Richard Nixon's 1973–1974 Watergate scandal, and ultimately, to Communist victory.

The legacy of Vietnam lives on. The immediate results included the 1969 Nixon Doctrine, which placed the primary burden for regional defense on American allies; the abolition of the draft in 1973; the 1973 War Powers Act; the 1975 Clark Amendment, which forbade U.S. covert involvement in the Angolan civil war; deep cuts in the defense budget during the early 1970s; and a generalized readiness in the press and Congress to believe the worst about the military, the CIA, and U.S. commitments abroad.

"By 1975," Richard Betts of the Brookings Institution ob-

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serves, "the dominant 'lesson' was that Washington should take no risks, that it should not begin messy involvements in the Third World if there is *any* danger that they cannot be concluded without considerable sacrifice."

The election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 may largely have signified a reaction to Watergate rather than to Vietnam. Nonetheless, the former Georgia governor promised to cut defense spending. He harbored mixed feelings about Vietnam. "We have an aversion to military involvement in foreign countries," he said in response to a newsman's question about troubles in Zaire in May 1977. "We are suffering, or benefiting, from the experience that we had in Vietnam." During his first year in office, Carter cut the Pentagon budget (from \$132 billion in FY 1976 to \$124 billion in FY 1978), canceled the B-1 bomber, and first advanced, then retracted under protests from Congress and our Asian allies, a proposal to withdraw 30,000 U.S. troops from Korea.

### **El Salvador Is Not Vietnam**

The Soviet dispatch of 17,000 advisers to Ethiopia and South Yemen and 23,000 Cubans to Angola did not bring on U.S. military intervention, but the sudden collapse in Iran of the pro-American Shah's regime in January 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the seemingly endless captivity of 53 hostages in the Teheran embassy did stir the American public. By the end of 1980, Americans had begun to feel "troubled, aggressive, tough, and resentful," according to pollster Daniel Yankelovich.

Like the 1950 Communist invasion of South Korea, an international crisis had galvanized popular support for rearmament. In January 1980, President Carter sought to increase defense expenditures by more than four percent annually (after inflation) over five years, while Ronald Reagan campaigned for an even higher rate of Pentagon spending.

In the newly elected administration's plans, most of the additional "Reagan money" was earmarked for ships, missiles, and aircraft with the Navy and "strategic deterrence" the chief benefactors.

But the current trouble spots lie elsewhere.

In "the American backyard," the six-year-old guerrilla war in El Salvador poses the most immediate threat to U.S. interests. This low-intensity struggle is partly sustained by assistance from Nicaragua, which is in turn supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union. Happily for the White House, El Salvador is very different "on the ground" from South Vietnam, despite the seemingly similar images on U.S. television of jungles, moun-

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tains, guerrillas, helicopters, and U.S. advisers.

The guerrillas, mostly led by admirers of Fidel Castro, belong to five different factions; they lack the tenacity, organization, and willingness to die that characterized the Vietnamese Communists. They have no counterpart to Ho Chi Minh. Their spokesmen concede that they do not have, as yet, the peasant support necessary for a true popular revolt. Nor do they enjoy sanctuaries in neighboring countries; both Honduras and Guatemala are run by pro-American regimes. The greatest asset of the rebels has been the sloth, corruption, and factionalism of El Salvador's military leadership, which has been unable—or unwilling—to curb right-wing death squads, and unable to win many hearts and minds. The people simply try to survive.

In El Salvador, as elsewhere in the region, the United States could benefit from the fact that Western ideas of democracy and pluralism are less alien than they were to the Indochinese. But prospects for a negotiated settlement seem slim in the absence of an effective political center and of any real incentive for either side to make a deal. Indeed, as Americans should know, civil wars, by their very nature, seldom end in compromise.

Almost no one, least of all the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *wants* to commit thousands of U.S. troops to Central America. To avoid this prospect, calm Congress, and still ward off a Marxist victory, the Reagan administration has adopted an *ad hoc* mix of diplomacy and covert (CIA) and overt (military training and economic aid) assistance to help friendly forces in Central America.

### Good-bye to Pluralism

In nearby Nicaragua, the United States had helped to maintain the corrupt and cruel regime of the Somozas, father and son, since 1936. In a reversal of policy, the Carter administration granted recognition and some \$75 million in economic aid to the Sandinista rebels after they ousted Anastasio Somoza in June 1979. Since then, the Managua regime under Rafael Cordoba, Sergio Ramírez Mercado, and Daniel Ortega Saavedra has moved sharply to the left, started a Soviet-supplied arms build-up, invited 3,500 Soviet and Cuban advisers into the country, jailed opponents, curbed the press, and, generally, failed to live up to its pledges to the Organization of American States to promote democratic "pluralism." Several leading Sandinistas have fled into exile or joined the guerrilla opposition. At the behest of President Reagan, the CIA is supplying 8,000 to 10,000 anti-Sandinista guerrillas, or "contras," on the northern (Honduran) and southern (Costa Rican) borders with light

**THE DOLLARS AND POLITICS OF DEFENSE:  
CARTER AND REAGAN**

With annual \$200 billion federal deficits in prospect, and national elections approaching, the "guns versus butter" debate over President Reagan's projected \$1.8 trillion, five-year Pentagon budget is likely to continue.

Senator Gary Hart (D.-Colo.), for example, has called the Reagan plan "excessive and inappropriate in view of the condition of our economy and the severe budget cutbacks the administration proposes in other areas." But others, such as the Hoover Institution's Albert Wohlstetter, reply that the critics treat "what the founding fathers called the 'common defense' as if it were only one more domestic interest group clamoring for an entitlement or a larger share of the domestic pie. . . ." Defense spending, Wohlstetter contends, must be determined by a careful calculation of external threats to American security.

Today's difficulties stem in part from Vietnam and the uncompleted rearmament efforts of the early 1960s. The Kennedy administration greatly expanded U.S. strategic and conventional forces. But the \$130 billion Vietnam War intervened, slowing both strategic weapons procurement and the research and development needed for overall modernization.

Presidents Nixon and Ford, reflecting the public's post-Vietnam antipathy to the military, cut defense spending (in constant 1972 dollars) from \$98.1 billion in 1969 to \$66.9 billion in 1976. Only part of the decline can be traced to the winding down of the war: U.S. military manpower shrank to its lowest levels since 1950.

Both friends and foes of Reagan's build-up often forget that the current upsurge began in earnest under Jimmy Carter. Carter did slash Ford's *projected* budget for FY 1978 by several billion dollars, but real spending (adjusted for inflation) actually rose slightly as Carter sought to meet his 1977 pledge to NATO to increase real defense spending by three percent a year. And the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted Carter to ask Congress for even higher increases.

Carter's public vacillation on defense issues made him an easy target for candidate Ronald Reagan during the 1980 election campaign. But Carter began many of the key programs now associated with Reagan: the MX strategic missile, the M-1 tank, the Rapid Deployment Force, the Pershing IIs and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe, and the improvement of communications and command. The Democrat's 1980 partial grain embargo also anticipated Reagan's economic pressure against the Soviet bloc. "Apart from the SALT II agreement," Harvard's Samuel Huntington notes, "no broad military concept or policy of the Carter administration was rejected by the Reagan administration."

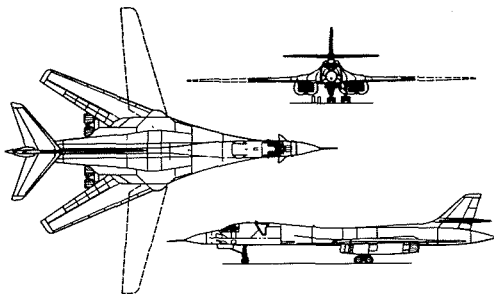
Yet Reagan shows far more determination. He displays no doubts about the value of military strength in superpower relations; rearmament does not take a back seat to arms control. In another break with Carter, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger has promised to answer Soviet aggression (presumably, against Western Europe) by launching counteroffensives against the enemy's outposts (e.g., Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam), rather than simply relying on traditional defensive strategy in the NATO area.

The Reagan program's most striking features are new conventional weapons and forces designed for combat outside Europe, including the Persian Gulf. The lion's share of the new Reagan funds would go to the Navy to build 112 new warships (for a total of 650 combat vessels by 1995)—amphibious assault ships, two new large \$3.4 billion nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, Aegis guided-missile cruisers, SSN-68 attack submarines, and the reactivation of Iowa-class battleships with Tomahawk cruise missiles.

Congress has already trimmed Reagan's defense program (by eight percent in 1983), in part to meet domestic outcries, but also because the White House plan contains some major contradictions. Reagan, like some of his predecessors, has emphasized long-term purchases of shiny new cruisers and bombers but has slighted "readiness" of existing forces and refused to revive conscription.

And Reagan may someday regret his frequent claims—designed to arouse popular support for his defense budgets—that the Russians have won strategic superiority over the United States. As the Brookings Institution's William Kaufmann observes, playing the "numbers game" can only backfire: No matter how much the United States spends, it will probably never catch up with the Soviets in manpower, tanks, and even strategic weapons, thus reinforcing the very perception of American weakness that Reagan seeks to avoid.

Finally, the Reagan administration has yet to launch a comprehensive review of its foreign and defense goals, spurring doubts even among its allies that it has matched means to ends. For example, the early confusion within the White House over U.S. aims in Central America has made it difficult to win congressional votes for covert aid to Nicaragua's "contra" rebels. As budget deficits stir opposition to rearmament, the Reagan White House will have to set clearer priorities—or leave the choices to its adversaries on Capitol Hill.



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arms, advisers, and other assistance.

For all its strong rhetoric and military maneuvers in the area, the Reagan White House has been unable to move directly either to force reforms on the Salvadoran regime or to supply friendly forces with adequate military and financial aid. Vietnam haunts the debates in Congress. Indeed, the administration has been reluctant to increase the small number (55) of U.S. military advisers in El Salvador partly because of congressional outcries and partly because of the apparent popular U.S. indifference toward the fate of Central America. In a *New York Times*/CBS poll conducted in June 1983, only 25 percent of those surveyed knew that the United States was supporting the Salvadoran government, and only 13 percent realized that Washington sides with the insurgent "contras" in Nicaragua. With the growing debate in Washington, public awareness may increase.

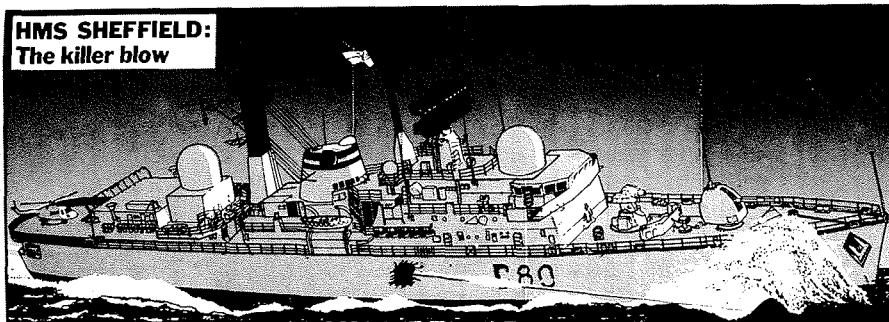
#### **"Power Projection"?**

In the Middle East, which in early 1983 supplied nine percent of U.S., 49 percent of French, and 66 percent of Japanese oil imports, Washington has a major commitment. The United States has pledged not only to safeguard the independence of Israel but to preserve the flow of Persian Gulf oil to the Western industrial countries and Japan. In keeping with the Carter Doctrine, President Reagan asserted in October 1980 that "There's no way that we could stand by and see [Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Gulf] taken over by anyone that would shut off the oil."

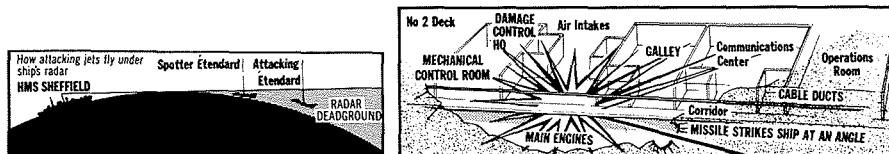
The big question is whether the United States could execute the military effort and muster the political fortitude required to honor this commitment, should the worst happen.

For the moment, no grave menace exists, even though the border war between Iran and Iraq that erupted in September 1980 has threatened more than once to spill over into other oil-producing Gulf states, notably Kuwait. The most likely trouble in the Gulf would be an externally aided rebellion against a pro-U.S. regime. To help meet such a contingency, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) theoretically can summon 300,000 men from all four services to fill the ranks of, or support, the Rapid Deployment Force. But as of mid-1983, the RDF for all practical purposes consisted of 17 loaded supply ships at anchor in the lagoon of Diego Garcia, five to seven steaming days from the Gulf, ready to support 12,500 Marines for about 30 days of fighting. The Marines would be flown in from California to "marry up" with the supplies. In the words of Senator John Glenn (D.-Ohio), a former Marine, the RDF "has just three prob-





**HMS SHEFFIELD:  
The killer blow**



*After the 1982 sinking of H.M.S. Sheffield by a single Argentine Exocet off the Falklands, congressional critics urged the U.S. to build smaller, more numerous ships that may offer less inviting targets to enemy missiles than do a few huge but vulnerable \$3.4 billion super-carriers.*

lems: It's not rapid, it's not deployable, and it's not a force."

Even if the President, in the event of a crisis, could win congressional approval for a U.S. troop deployment in the Gulf, the RDF would face major obstacles. The local geography is unfavorable. And the realities belie easy Washington talk of "power projection." Consider, for instance, an intervention by the RDF to secure the five main Saudi oil fields, which cover an area (10,000 square miles) about twice the size of Connecticut. In an emergency—e.g., the imminent destruction of the Saudi oil fields by hostile sapper groups—the RDF's designated Navy, Marine, Army, and Air Force personnel would have to reach their destination very quickly. Just to air-land a 15,000-man division with three days of supplies would require numerous roundtrip flights by the limited U.S. fleet of 234 C-141 and 70 C-5 giant cargo planes. Even under the best conditions, a Marine Corps study estimated in 1981, "the initial forces deployed [would] run out of rations (and bullets, if committed) before the last of the division is landed," and before the ships at Diego Garcia could reach the Gulf.

Other difficulties could plague an airlift of even modest proportions. The United States has air landing agreements (for re-

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fueling) with Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey, as well as access to ports in Somalia and Kenya, but in every case, full cooperation by the host government would depend upon the politics of the emergency. Other facilities once available to U.S. air or naval forces—in Ethiopia, Iran, Libya, and Malta, to name a few—are now gone, and the growing unwillingness of our European allies to offer landing rights in advance could require eleventh-hour negotiations to secure them. The U.S. airlift to Israel during the 1973 October War illustrated some of the problems: NATO allies, such as Greece, Turkey, Spain, Italy, West Germany, and the Netherlands, refused the Americans permission to use their bases to resupply Israel for fear of offending the Arabs, and the U.S. C-5As and C-141s had to be refueled in flight by tanker aircraft at long intervals. To deliver one ton of materiel to Israel required five tons of fuel, and therefore greatly reduced the supplies that could be airlifted.

Yet despite its limited ability to intervene decisively, the RDF—with 1,800 Marines sometimes stationed in the Indian Ocean and a large backup force, including 12,500 California-based Marines, in the continental United States—may, by its very existence, serve as a useful deterrent to local conflagrations.

However, the chief deterrent to any massive Soviet thrust through Iran—the oft-cited “worst case”—would not be the RDF, but the strong prospect that such a move would risk setting off World War III.

It seems clear that in order to help NATO offset a Soviet threat in Europe, to diminish reliance on nuclear weapons, to deter attacks on South Korea, and to be prepared to fight in the Gulf and the Caribbean, the United States must mobilize, train, and equip its conventional combat forces more effectively than in the past. Yet the early Reagan defense budgets give top priority to the procurement of big-ticket, high-technology weapon systems—the B-1 bomber, nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, Trident submarines, the MX missile, and F-15 fighter aircraft. In the likely event that Congress cuts Pentagon outlays, the readiness of the general purpose forces will probably suffer disproportionately. Budgetary constraints aside, the nation has yet to determine when and how it would use its forces in all of the places it is pledged to defend.

