
BACKGROUND BOOKS

AMERICA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

"The art of war is of vital importance to the state," Chinese strategist Sun-tzu wrote 2,500 years ago. "It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence under no circumstances can it be neglected."

Anyone hoping to build a library on U.S. defense policy should beware: Most books on the subject are out-of-date before they reach print, and few make for easy bedtime reading. "Policy intellectuals" tend to chase headlines—nuclear disarmament is a current favorite—and to ignore the past.

The United States has traditionally kept its military forces as small as possible. Even after it joined the ranks of the recognized world powers in 1898, America relied on a small cadre of regulars and on a citizen army mobilized after a declaration of war. When the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, for instance, the U.S. Army had obsolete equipment and only 190,000 men and officers.

After World War II, the United States, no longer isolationist, first demobilized, then, facing Soviet threats abroad, revived the draft in 1948. But only after the 1950-53 Korean War began did the United States start to rearm. Since then, reflecting American technological gains, the U.S. military has become increasingly capital-intensive. Machines and firepower are substituted as much as possible for men, requiring in turn intensive training and a long logistical "tail."

This system often stirs complaints on Capitol Hill about a "fat" Army

and Air Force, but it is precisely this system that allows the United States to support sustained, highly flexible operations overseas in wartime. In Vietnam, as Zeb B. Bradford, Jr., and Frederic J. Brown observe in **The United States Army in Transition** (Sage, 1973), there was an unprecedented substitution of mobile tactics and firepower for the traditional costly ground assault. Where possible, Army rifle companies acted as "a finding and fixing force—an anvil against which the enemy could be destroyed by artillery and air power."

A common notion is that the generals are more likely than civilian leaders to favor military solutions to overseas crises. This is the thesis of Richard J. Barnet of the Institute for Policy Studies in **Roots of War: The Men and Institutions behind U.S. Foreign Policy** (Atheneum, 1972, cloth; Penguin, 1973, paper). Since World War II, he contends, the military has "supplied to the rest of the government the conceptual framework for thinking about foreign relations."

Not so, argues Richard Betts of the Brookings Institution. His study of **Soldiers, Statesmen and Cold War Crises** (Harvard, 1977) shows that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and lesser military men were generally *no more* eager to intervene in postwar crises than were the President's top civilian advisers. Sometimes, they were *less* eager, as in the case of Laos in 1961. Once U.S. troops were in battle, however, the military tended to urge more forceful policies than did the civilians, as in Vietnam after 1965.

For better or worse, "military advice," writes Betts, "has been most persuasive [to Presidents] as a veto of the use of force and least potent when it favored force."

"To a remarkable degree," Ohio University's John Lewis Gaddis adds in **Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy** (Oxford, 1982, cloth & paper), U.S. defense spending has been "the product, not so much of what the Russians have done, or of what has happened elsewhere in the world, but of internal forces operating within the United States," notably changing political fads and budget priorities.

Today, Adam Yarmolinsky and Gregory D. Foster observe in **Paradoxes of Power: The Military Establishment in the Eighties** (Ind. Univ., 1983), senior officers still answer primarily to their own service—Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine Corps. They regard the civilian Office of the Secretary of Defense as a "foreign power with which their organization is forced occasionally to deal," and concentrate in peacetime on "maximizing" their service's share of the defense spending pie.

The seeming unmanageability of defense programs—costing \$240 billion and employing 5,656,000 military personnel, Pentagon civilians, and defense plant workers in 1983—has spawned a "military reform" school of thinkers on national defense. In **National Defense** (Random, 1981, cloth; 1982, paper), the *Atlantic Monthly's* James Fallows attacks the professional military's penchant for extremely expensive, "high-tech" weapons over simpler, but equally effective ones.

Not everyone thinks high-tech is superfluous. The reformers may be right when they allege, for instance,

that the 106mm Recoilless Rifle not only sells for a fraction of the cost of the TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) missile, but is just as effective as the TOW in knocking out enemy tanks within 1,000 meters. But the TOW, unlike the 106mm, can also engage targets up to 3,750 meters away at night and has a special passive sighting device that, unlike infra-red devices, does not give away its position.

Moreover, conclude the authors of **The Defense Reform Debate: Issues and Analysis** (ed. by Asa A. Clark *et al.*, Johns Hopkins, forthcoming), many of the problems that the reformers have identified—poor Pentagon decision-making (notably through the ineffectiveness of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), unwieldy "force structure" (e.g., heavy Army armored divisions are unsuitable for Persian Gulf conditions), and weapons design and acquisition—are not the exclusive province of the armed services. Pentagon bureaucrats, Congress, defense contractors, and the news media all share the blame.

Nuclear strategy gets big headlines. But much of the literature on the subject remains almost theological in its complexity, the product of a small clique of policy intellectuals cloistered in California's RAND Corporation and other "think-tanks," notes freelance writer Fred Kaplan in **The Wizards of Armageddon** (Simon & Schuster, 1983). One exception is Bernard Brodie, who, in his classic **Strategy in the Missile Age** (Princeton, 1959), foresaw that the American abhorrence of preventive war would lead the U.S. military to develop "deterrent" retaliatory strategic forces whose survival had to be ensured.

Defense analyst John M. Collins in **U.S.—Soviet Military Balance: Con-**

cepts and Capabilities, 1960–1980 (McGraw-Hill, 1980) outlines alarming *quantitative* deficiencies in the strategic and tactical forces of the United States relative to those of its chief adversary. Yet the popular “bean-counting” approach obscures the uncertainties of how weapons (and national leaders) would perform in wartime, observe Samuel Huntington and the other authors of **The Strategic Imperative: New Policies for American Security** (Ballinger, 1982). While the Kremlin seeks to exploit opportunities when and where the West appears weak, Harvard’s Adam B. Ulam suggests, in **Dangerous Relations: The Soviet Union in World Politics, 1970–1982** (Oxford, 1983), that their calculation of the “correlation of forces” in Europe necessarily depends not just on raw numbers of men and tanks.

And, as Richard Betts argues in **Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning** (Brookings, 1982, cloth & paper), various factors—the ascendancy that the defense usually enjoys over the offense, the questionable loyalty of Polish and other East European forces, the superior NATO pilot training—help to offset the Warsaw Pact’s considerable advantages in numbers and geography (e.g., shorter supply lines).

On the other hand, Betts warns, a Warsaw Pact surprise attack could pose a serious danger to the Alliance. With a little bit of luck, the Soviets could quickly divide West Germany and push allied troops to the Rhine within a week, long before major reinforcements could arrive from America or NATO politicians could agree on a united response.

In the end, concludes London’s International Institute for Strategic Studies in its annual review of **The Military Balance** (IISS, 1982, paper

only), neither side could be assured of victory in a European war: “The consequences for an attacker would be unpredictable, and the risks, particularly of nuclear escalation, incalculable.”

Those risks are the subject of Jonathan Schell’s controversial sermon, **The Fate of the Earth** (Knopf, 1982, cloth; Avon, 1982, paper). The *New Yorker* writer observes that a single 20-megaton bomb (of which the Soviets have an estimated 113 in their arsenal) exploded over Manhattan’s Empire State Building would produce a fireball four-and-a-half miles in diameter and flatten an area of 1,450 square miles, killing millions.

But even serious efforts to cap the arms race may fail in the absence of trust between the superpowers. Both John Newhouse in **Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT** (Holt, 1973) and Strobe Talbot in **Endgame: The Inside Story of SALT II** (Harper, 1979, cloth; 1980, paper) show that dissimilarities between Soviet and American strategic forces and the technical difficulties of verifying Soviet compliance with the arms control agreements nearly wrecked the SALT I and SALT II talks with Moscow.

Détente was doomed from the start, contends Robert W. Tucker in **The Purposes of American Power: An Essay on National Security** (Praeger, 1981), because Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter took too rosy a view of Soviet intentions. According to Tucker, the underlying premise of détente was badly flawed: that Western economic incentives, mutual recognition of the status quo in Europe, and arms control accords would lead to lasting cooperation between communist and Western countries.

The 1982 conflict between Great Britain and Argentina showed, as recounted by reporters of the *Sunday*

Times of London in **War in the Falklands: The Full Story** (Harper, 1982), that the booming export sales of modern arms (notably that of France's Exocet missile to Argentina) can dramatically narrow the gap between great (or near-great) and lesser powers. In the end, superior British training and esprit decided the battle.

Soviet inroads in the Third World during the late 1970s catalyzed a neoconservative reaction against détente in this country. *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, addressing **The Present Danger** (Simon & Schuster, 1980, cloth & paper), charged the Carter administration with "Finlandizing" America and called for a major U.S. arms build-up to contain Soviet expansion.

The problem of winning localized, conventional wars in a nuclear age has perplexed analysts (and statesmen) throughout the postwar era. In **Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy** (Chicago, 1957), Robert E. Osgood develops the theory of using small wars to support containment of the communists. He argues that the danger of limited conflict escalating into total war requires an American President (e.g., Truman in aiding South Korea) to seek something less than the unconditional surrender of the enemy; to maintain a diplomatic dialogue looking toward a negotiated settlement; and to restrict the geographical scope of the war. (This has been, in some respects, the 1983 Reagan strategy in Central America.) Yet, be-

cause Americans value human life so highly, Osgood believes, they "are disposed to demand that the sacrifice of life serve some purpose of commensurate value; and total victory seems like the minimum compensation."

But even "small" wars like Korea and Vietnam may impose an unacceptable cost in U.S. blood and treasure, according to Russell F. Weigley in **The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy** (Macmillan, 1973, cloth; Ind. Univ., 1977, paper). Nowhere in the Third World, he concludes, "does the use of combat offer much promise [of decisive outcomes] for the United States today."

The lessons of the Vietnam War are still hotly debated, but most military analysts would agree with Harry Summers's contention in **On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War** (Presidio, 1982) that the American defeat in Indochina was primarily *political* in origin: U.S. leaders failed to define their objectives in Vietnam clearly, to pursue those aims with determination, and to mobilize the nation for war.

"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make," the German strategist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) wrote in **On War** (ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton, 1976), "is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking. . . . This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."

EDITOR'S NOTE: For further reading see WQ's *Background Books* essays on *Strategic Arms Control* (Autumn, '77), *Vietnam as History* (Spring, '78), *The American Military* (Spring, '79), and *Vietnam as the Past* (Summer, '83).