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# SET AND DRIFT

## The Role of the Marine Corps over the Next Decade

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Daniel W. Fitz-Simons

**T**HE DIRECTION THAT THE U.S. MARINE CORPS takes over the next fifty years will depend largely upon the politico-military role of the United States in the post-Cold War era. The Marine Corps has never existed in a purely military vacuum, and it is probable that because of its special role in rapid deployment and amphibious operations it will continue to serve as the primary agent of U.S. power projection throughout an increasingly unstable globe. The traditionally close relationship between the Marine Corps and the Department of State can be expected to continue, mainly because the Marines are capable of providing rapid and credible military support for the diplomatic and strategic objectives of U.S. foreign policy. In fact, the special capabilities of the Marine Corps will be in even more demand over the next few decades. The long-standing, large-scale Soviet military threat has been replaced by a multipolar arrangement ripe with opportunities for mid and low-intensity conflicts. Ancient religious, racial, and cultural hatreds are resurfacing, while demographic and

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economic problems continue to plague underdeveloped regions. Since World War II, over 150 wars have been fought, ninety percent of them "small wars" in Third World countries. Moreover, narcotics trafficking, hostage scenarios, and terrorism will continue to threaten U.S. national security interests.

In this unstable, rapidly changing diplomatic scenario, the unique at-sea capability of the USMC will provide U.S. policymakers with several distinct advantages. First and foremost, the sudden appearance of a Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) off the coast of a potential belligerent would serve to reinforce U.S. diplomatic credibility. This self-sustained, independent military force would send a strong message but one that could be adjusted to the situation. In a political sense, the MAGTF is viewed by both the U.S. public and the potential adversary as a short-term presence. In addition, it is not dependent upon forward bases, cleared airstrips, or the diplomatic whims of a host country of questionable loyalty. The last point is especially significant in an age where U.S. base rights are declining (for instance, in Panama, Okinawa, Subic Bay, and

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Nato ports). Because of its ability to remain on station at sea, the MAGTF can be withheld, massed, or used as a distracting force, even as a political reinforcement to a U.S. ally. On the strictly military side, the MAGTF is capable of forcible entry, and with deep-echelon support from the U.S. Navy, it can take enemy territory and hold it for extended periods of time. Moreover, all American embassies and most of the politico-economic centers of gravity in Third World countries are located in the cities, and seventy-five percent of these are within twenty-five miles of a coastline—which places them within range of Marine amphibious capabilities.<sup>1</sup>

The Maritime Prepositioning Ship concept will continue to provide advantages of strategic mobility and sustainability, particularly in volatile Third World crisis areas. The USMC also has a tradition of developing and perfecting new combat weapons and tactics. The Marines were the first to experiment with close air-to-ground support, in the Nicaraguan “Banana Wars” of the 1920s and 1930s, and they used helicopters in the Korean War, long before Vietnam. Marines literally wrote the book on counterinsurgency operations (*The Small Wars Manual*), before World War II.<sup>2</sup> The “tribal memory” of the Marine Corps has also served it well in the development of amphibious doctrine. This tradition of practical flexibility and willingness to experiment will continue to make the Corps a vibrant and effective combat force of the future.

The Marine force structure will have to retain enough flexibility to be effective in high, medium, and low-intensity conflicts throughout the world.

Thus, the goal of the Marine Corps is to be light enough to deploy forces rapidly to a given area but heavy enough to attain a decisive victory on arrival.

At some point in the future, USMC capabilities will be enhanced by modern over-the-horizon amphibious assault assets that will complement the current air-cushioned landing craft. New and different types of specially designed amphibious support aircraft like the V-22 Osprey will also be developed. Joint exercises with Army Rangers and airmobile, airborne, and light infantry divisions, as well as combined operations with the British Royal Marines and the French Foreign Legion, will probably receive added emphasis with the complementary role of these units in mind.<sup>3</sup> Forward-deployed special-operations-capable Marine Expeditionary Units will continue to evolve and will probably be called upon to use their sabotage, subversion, counterterrorist, psychological warfare, and escape-and-evasion skills. It is also highly likely that parachute and scuba-trained Marine reconnaissance units will be called on short notice to launch extended-range amphibious night raids. Peacekeeping missions, intelligence collection, mobile training teams, riverine operations, and the evacuation of U.S. nationals are also likely scenarios, along with the traditional functions of providing security in American embassies, naval facilities, and warships at sea. The number of these Marine security forces could increase in direct proportion to the terrorist threat.

Because of budgetary considerations, the Marine Corps of the future will no doubt be smaller than it is today. Nevertheless, the Marines have always taken the position that they provide the most effective punch at the lowest cost. Moreover, the Marine Corps' suitability for rapid-deployment missions is enhanced by its skill in the use of all-arms combat formations—Marine landing forces currently receive support from aircraft and artillery, the vertical-take-off-and-landing AV-8B aircraft is extremely effective, and naval gunfire combined with Marine close air-to-ground support is the best such support in the world. The fact that the Marines will remain the only permanent combined-arms force will fortify their position before budget-conscious congressional committees.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, a highly sophisticated Marine Corps will continue to function as the primary rapid deployment force, particularly if the United States becomes involved in mid and low-intensity conflicts in Third World areas. One hopes that lessons learned and institutional memories will combine with diplomatic caution to avoid no-win wars (Vietnam) or untenable missions (Lebanon). If the Marine Corps can maintain its high standard of recruitment and training and its flexible force structure, it will remain a fighting force second to none, in the tradition of Smedley Butler, "Red Mike" Edson, and "Chesty" Puller.

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### Notes

1. Dept. of the Navy and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, *The Role of the Marine Corps in National Defense* (FMFM 1-2) (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1991), pp. 30-36.  
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2. Dept. of the Navy and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, *The Small Wars Manual* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1940).
3. Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, *Concepts & Issues* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1992), pp. 26-28.
4. Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 815-871.

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### **Eleventh International Naval History Symposium**

The History Department of the U.S. Naval Academy will sponsor the eleventh international Naval History Symposium from 21 October to 23 October 1993.

Proposals for individual papers or sessions in *all* fields and *all* areas of naval history, from ancient to recent, are welcomed. A volume of selected symposium papers is published biannually. Contact Robert W. Love, Jr., History Department, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, 21402-5044. Phone (410) 267-3125 or (410) 267-3803; Fax (410) 267-3225. The deadline for proposals is 1 April 1993.

### **Naval Air Early Warning (AEW)**

Historical researcher is looking for information on naval AEW and VAW/VW squadrons, including the following types of aircraft: TBM-3W, AD-2W/3W/4W/5W, E-1A/B, E-2A/B/C, B-17G, PO-1W, WV-1/2/2E, W2V-1, EC-121. Contact Leigh Armistead, (804) 464-5957.

*Notice to our readers:* The Autumn 1992 issue carried review essays written by Mr. Albert M. Bottoms and Dr. Jon Tetsuro Sumida on *Sacred Vessels: The Cult of the Battleship and the Rise of the U.S. Navy*, by Robert L. O'Connell. As a result of an editorial error we neglected to state that Dr. Sumida declined to respond to Mr. Bottoms's comments.