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Thomas H. Etzold

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National Strategy and Mobilization: Emerging Issues for the 1990s

Thomas H. Etzold

It is not an army we must train for war; it is a nation.

Woodrow Wilson, April 1917

In the latter two years of the Reagan administration, mobilization and related issues rapidly grew in importance. How and how well these issues are addressed in the early 1990s will considerably affect our security and well-being far into the 21st century. This article discusses factors that are increasing the significance of mobilization matters, sets out several propositions or theorems on which war gaming and other analytic work is urgently needed, advances some preliminary conclusions as to where the more difficult challenges and adjustments for U.S. and Western security may lie, and sets forth recommendations for action as the Bush administration begins to deal with structural elements of U.S. and Western security into the 21st century.

National Security in Changing Times

Even in changing times, some things remain more the same than different. In attempting to state a concept of national security for the coming several decades—in considerable measure a central task of the Bush administration's recent comprehensive review of security policy—a look back is essential for identifying central continuities, if not in our circumstances then at least in our values and goals. As a nation, Americans tend to forget more than they remember.

In this regard, we need to remember that, at its most successful times in foreign and security affairs, the United States has been led by people who saw and sought a high degree of interdependence between the military, societal, and economic factors of national security. Since the Second World

The Honorable Thomas H. Etzold was formerly Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College, and thereafter Assistant Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and now resides in Washington, DC.

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War, President Dwight D. Eisenhower has been perhaps the most articulate and consistent in doing this. His professional military career may have been longer than his political one, but he was indeed a statesman. In his view, often expressed in speeches, letters, and internal policy documents, he emphasized that any reasonable concept of national security for a free, democratic people had to address the factors that made this country a place that we wanted to protect, with institutions we wanted to preserve, and with the ability to make a difference for the good beyond our borders. Quality of life, accessibility of education and levels of attainment, the physical and mental health of the population, improving prosperity and a sense of confidence in the nation's future and that of its partners in democracy were all elements of his comprehensive concept of national security. They remain centrally important for coming years.

Nevertheless, changing circumstances at home and abroad require us to reconsider the ways and means by which we can most effectively assure, or indeed improve on, the nation's long-standing commitment to "promote the general welfare and provide for the common defense." The major elements of change we confront are making it increasingly important to do these things together, in coordination, rather than separately or in some atmosphere of trade-offs. More sophisticated approaches to mobilization issues are part of this process. A few of the most important elements of change follow:

- Our strategy is changing in fundamental ways. We are moving from a grand strategy of containment to one of seeking strategic stability, and from a warfighting strategy based on the use of nuclear weapons early in a conflict to one of developing the capacity for "sustained" or "protracted" conventional conflict in both East-West and regional wars. There are profound consequences for mobilization in this shift.

- Our warfare technologies are changing rapidly. In some ways, it is no longer clear what it would mean to mobilize in support of a significant military effort.

- Our economic structure has been transformed in the last two decades. We have not yet fully mapped our present or future economic, technical, and industrial abilities, nor have we grasped their implications for supporting modern combat forces in the field on any large scale.

- We face economic constraints unprecedented in the post-World War Two years, not only in defense, but throughout the government. While many commentators have prematurely held rites over the demise of the American economy, it remains (at something over \$5 trillion a year) by far the world's largest and retains many other strengths as well. But consensus has formed that the United States is in for a period of slow growth, complex structural readjustment and economic/technical competition of uncertain dimensions.

- Our traditional allies face similar economic prospects, while their domestic politics and diverging threat perceptions make it increasingly

difficult to harmonize or cooperate in security affairs. We cannot expect our traditional friends and allies to bail us out of this economic predicament, because economically they cannot do it, and even if they could economically, they would not wish to politically.

- Arms control efforts have gained momentum sufficient to ensure significant alterations in the size, composition, disposition, doctrines, and strategies of both nuclear and nonnuclear forces. While many of the expected reductions and changes in forces will take some years to realize, by the turn of the century we will be endeavoring to support—through readiness, logistics, and mobilization—forces very different from those we have developed and fielded over the past thirty-five years.

Emerging Mobilization Issues

Certain mobilization issues require urgent study in the early 1990s. Those following seem among the more important to explore sooner rather than later.

- It is essential to integrate mobilization planning and preparations with strategy and war planning, including such matters as approaches to deterrence, concern for reaction times, ability to respond to ambiguous warning, capability to execute our strategies, pursuit of conflict to a successful conclusion, and return to a postwar condition as consistent as possible with our preference for free markets and the minimum government role in private sector activities.

Effective mobilization involves much more than calling up men and putting them in uniforms, boots, and socks. It involves nothing less than integrating the resources of the nation for the purposes of the war. This task does not end when we have “pushed” out of the depots and into the combat zones all our current stocks. It ends only when we have brought a war to its conclusion and come back to a condition that is both comfortable and productive for us in peacetime. Make no mistake about it: In any sizable conflict, we will have an essentially government-run economy. We must consider well before war how to do this on terms that do not unduly prejudice the government’s ability to lay down this role upon the restoration of peace. Logistics annexes to present war plans fall woefully short in the foregoing contexts, but these inadequate logistical annexes drive such mobilization planning as there is, with obvious unfortunate effects.

We can and must think about both strategy and mobilization in terms of possible phases of a war. The requirements of each phase will not be the same. We need a mobilization contour consistent with and linked to those embedded in war plans so that we can evaluate at each stage what we are trying to do, and in what priority, what we need to do it with, and how much we need of various materials, efforts, and types of support.

● We cannot solve our problems in this area by recreating the economy, the industry, and/or the patterns of cooperation and competition that formerly existed here and in the alliance. As author Thomas Wolfe said so many years ago, “We can’t go home again.” It is distressing to hear the amount of attention and credence being given to the idea that one major answer to our problems in mobilization, defense, and economic independence is to rebuild the industry and economy we had, say, in the middle 1950s. To do so is neither the answer to these problems nor possible in the first place. For this, there are at least a few compelling reasons.

First, the time lines on which we must work have changed. As a nation, we had a good three-year-long run-up on both World War I and World War II, not the few days, weeks, or months that various scenarios and plans now envision. The United States was building submarines in Canada for Great Britain in 1914. Very few people knew it at the time, and few seem to have learned of it since (despite there being a fine small book on the subject by one of this nation’s leading diplomatic historians). That was only one of the “black programs” of the era; one way or another, through exports and other efforts such as these, the United States was supporting a tremendous proportion of the Western war effort, including exporting more than half a million horses for the use of the allies in Europe.

President Franklin Roosevelt began preparing for a U.S. role in a renewed world war at least as early as 1938 in terms of working with industry, and as early as 1934 in the specific commissions he gave to military-technical experts such as Charles Lindbergh to collect information on German military and other programs. Well before formal hostilities with the Axis powers, American forces were maintaining logistic lifelines across the Atlantic and prosecuting the war against German submarines. The main difference between World War I and World War II is that we were paid for what we sent to Europe in World War I, whereas in World War II nearly everything was sent on credit or under Lend-Lease legislation. (Very few of these debts were ever repaid, even in part.)

The point is that we no longer can expect any such time line to prepare for a conflict. However many days, weeks, or months of notice the experts tell us to expect, if we do in fact fight without early resort to nuclear weapons, there will not be enough time to make a significant difference in what we start with and what we have yet to do when initial stocks are exhausted. We need to think differently about what may be required before, or in the foreground, of war; and we need to review many of our strategic intentions and plans to suit our abilities—and not just to state optimal requirements.

There is another reason why we cannot go home again: although we have talked about it a great deal, we have not as a nation—or as a security community—come to terms with the costs of modern warfare. Advanced weapons are now in the hands of many smaller states; virtually no potential

conflict can be considered small or minor in economic terms. World War II cost the United States roughly \$19,497,000 per day. The Arab-Israeli War in 1973 cost the United States \$294,000,000 per day (in 1973 dollars), and the United States was not even a party to the conflict! Some figures on the costs of war in Vietnam suggest that the United States paid upwards of \$50,000 per enemy casualty. For that kind of money, especially in 1960s and 1970s dollars, we could doubtless have bought these adversaries farms and/or relocated them more inexpensively. (Our own cost per U.S. casualty figures raise questions at least as serious.)

Because we know so little, relatively, about the state and structure of our economy and how modern warfare might evolve, there are limits on our ability to forecast the costs of the next war in which the United States might be a significant participant, whether or not the opponent includes the Soviet Union or Eastern bloc. Among the most conservative estimates now available is that a war in Europe could well cost upwards of \$2 trillion per year, or forty percent of current GNP. (The federal budget in 1942, incidentally, by some calculations allocated 89 percent to the war effort.)

In short, time lines, cost factors, and changes in economic structure make it impossible to recreate earlier industrial-economic conditions—or even to believe that there can still be such a thing as a “small war.”

- The United States is increasingly going to find itself divided from its allies in handling regional crises and problems, especially when there is some possibility of military action. This is especially important in view of the role allies play in supporting our economy both in peace and in war. It is also significant because of the extent to which we now depend on forward basing and associated agreements. In most cases, our forward based troops are not available for use in contingency without the express consent of the host nation. Many regional conflicts will affect U.S. interests differently and perhaps to a greater degree than those of even our “best friends.” We will have to deal alone with such problems, while remaining highly dependent on what some other nations do for us in producing and providing essential war parts and materials. Recent cases in point: our closest allies for the most part did not support the U.S. decision to refuse Arafat the opportunity to make anti-U.S. propaganda on U.S. territory; and only one of our Nato allies cooperated in U.S. retaliation against Libyan terrorism in the mid-1980s. Problems of this genre are certain to become more numerous and more acute in coming years.

- Despite the problems that we face with regard to balance of payments, balance of trade, competition and non-tariff barriers, we must encourage the economic growth and technological development of a number of Asian states because we need them to be as good as they can be. For wartime mobilization, we depend increasingly on such states not only for kinds of plate steel that

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we no longer routinely manufacture—a now popular example—but for specialized parts of advanced weapon systems.

Under current political conditions surrounding deficits and trade negotiations, this poses something of a dilemma. As irritating as some aspects of these economic relationships have been, it is in the U.S. interest for the economies of Asian democracies to grow. To the extent that we must consider various sanctions, retaliations, and the like, we must do so with a clear recognition that we have a lot at stake in the health, growth, and advancement of Asian economies. We need to consider dealing with these on sectoral, not wholesale bases, and to reflect carefully on which of their capabilities are most important to our well-being over time. And we must do so before pressure grows to take punitive steps.

- We must find ways, despite the economic constraints we face, to shift investment from intrawar expenditures to prewar expenditures or investments. In the future, we are going to have to pay a greater proportion of our war costs “up front.” There are at least two important reasons for this: first, the matter of shortening time lines and second, that of having modern high-performance combat systems that can neither be adequately supported nor replaced in war.

Short time lines on the leading edge of crises, transitions, and conflicts breed large and unusual uncertainties. On any given occasion it is difficult to know where, exactly, we may have to engage, against whom, on what scale, and with whom at our side. In crises as in war, doing some things earlier rather than later can considerably predispose outcomes. If our mobilization capabilities are to be useful in the peace and early crisis stages of any potential conflict, they are going to have to be well developed, in place, and functional on a continuing basis. At present, and in part because of premature modernization in major systems and poor management of these efforts, we continue to face the familiar trade-off between modernizing forces and maintaining current capabilities through adequate funding of maintenance, readiness, supplies, spares, and the like. We are in effect getting less capable forces for more money in aggregate, even though new capital equipments are in most cases (and when well supported and operated) more capable than those they replace.

While these should be—and in the professional community are—obvious points, they are apparently not obvious enough to have caused fundamental change in our approach to these matters. There is no merit whatsoever in having modern forces that you cannot absorb technologically, support sufficiently to employ near the top end of promised capability, and replace or otherwise compensate for their attrition in conflict.

Large formations or high unit-cost systems that cannot be used near optimum performance or protected while being maintained, rearmed, or prepared for multiple missions are positive liabilities rather than assets. Such

forces become lucrative targets and strategic debits when we are not prepared to use them surely, well, repeatedly, and on time. Our ability to use and support forces in the field, however modern or modernized they are, is at least as important as what generation of technology they reflect. We need better balance in this area if we are to make anything significant out of the heavy defense investments of the Reagan years.

- Government-industry relationships are critical to improvement of our ability to mobilize; these cannot work quickly enough in potential conflict without substantial progress in them during peacetime. Present controversies over conflict of interest laws, regulation and deregulation, and inadequate integration of government needs, views and operations at various levels, paralleled in some cases in major sectors of industry and the economy, make this a challenging problem indeed.

An example: In the Second World War, about \$100 billion was spent to increase U.S. capability to produce high octane gasoline. In some respects, 100 octane gasoline was the tactical edge, especially in the air war. While the Germans have never forgotten that, most of us have. Of the \$100 billion, 75 percent came from industry. We need government-industry relationships that are reciprocal, i.e., not just what the government can do to help industry play a part in conflict, but what industry is prepared to do to help the government (and the nation) get through the most trying of circumstances.

It is not enough for the executive branch to have emergency powers to sign letter contracts and waive liabilities of various sorts. The National Defense Executive Reserve Program, for example, although theoretically government-wide, is now being used effectively only by the Department of Energy and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The Department of Defense has recently increased its efforts to take advantage of this legislation, but remains far short of fully exploiting this opportunity to have rapid access to highly experienced individuals in key industries and companies. But the NDER program is at best a way to tap substantive and managerial expertise, as well as liaison with industry sectors, under emergency conditions. It is far short of what will be needed in the way of public and private sector cooperation and coordination of the nation's technical, industrial, and managerial assets.

Present so-called ethical standards and noncompetitive salaries for senior executives in government, whatever their merit in restoring public confidence in government and curbing evident mismanagement of sizable programs (not only military ones), must also be reviewed in this context.

We may never in peacetime be able to practice the kind of close government-industry collaboration needed to be efficient and effective for mobilization during crisis or conflict. But if government and industry give serious and sustained attention to these matters in peace, we can certainly expect better performance, based on shared understandings of issues and

needs, if and when war ever comes. As Machiavelli wrote long ago, “A wise prince . . . should never remain idle in peaceful times, but industriously make good use of them, so that when fortune changes she may find him prepared to resist her blows, and to prevail in adversity.”

In this matter of government-industry relations, it is important to remember that not all wisdom resides in Washington (something that, when in Washington, is indeed difficult to keep in view). In the 1940 defense budget, the military services had a line item for 9,000 parachutes. At this time, President Roosevelt was telling leaders of the textile and other manufacturing industries that by the end of the year the United States would have the capacity to produce 50,000 war planes per year. (That sounds like an incredible number, and was, but this country in fact met that target and in following years exceeded it.) One textile manufacturing company’s president, upon hearing this, did some simple arithmetic: 50,000 planes/9,000 parachutes. He then went to the appropriate officials and said, “It looks to me like you ought to be buying at least 200,000 parachutes this year.” After some head-scratching, these officials agreed, and the line item was appropriately increased. Neither Washington in general nor the military in particular possesses all the knowledge or wisdom needed to mobilize for war, support war, or make war—a fact that places a very high premium on closer government-industry cooperation in peace and collaboration in war.

- We have become irreversibly dependent on what might be called a “distributed infrastructure” to support military operations on any significant scale or for almost any duration outside the Western Hemisphere. While this proposition is closely related to the earlier discussion of recreating the past, it is important enough to address directly because both economic and strategic choices are involved.

To add to what has been mentioned earlier concerning our genuine inability to return to earlier economic structure and conditions, in 1987, the latest year for which there are reliable statistics, 72 percent of America’s non-farm jobs were in the service sector. Despite rapid job creation in minimum-level wage positions, service-sector jobs seem likely to grow in proportion in the American economy. The immediate significance for the present discussion is this: The service sector is characterized by low productivity increases and cannot provide potential for rapidly expanding the economy as might be required for mobilization potential or mobilization itself. Surge capability in terms of pages per hour out of an IBM Memorywriter is not exactly what we may need. Having doctors cut their standard appointments from 20 minutes to 15 minutes so that they see “x” more people per day will not much advance national efforts to support forces in the field. Perhaps above all, we surely should not wish lawyers, used-car salesmen, and telephone solicitors to put out more complaints, extend their limited warranties to 35 rather than 30 days, or make more phone calls per hour.

While some of these examples may seem humorous, there is an underlying point of some weight: Economists are increasingly in accord on the point that private sector investment in technology and next-generation capital, rather than government direct investment in various economic sectors, is the best indicator of future mobilization capability. This view at present can only be described as preliminary, but in considering the challenging political, military, and economic features likely to characterize the next several decades, it needs careful and extensive examination. The government carries preponderant responsibility for pointing out which sectors of the economy are more important than others in the present context, and for providing incentives for companies—and even individuals—to work in the identified areas.

- In addition to the technological and organizational challenges already discussed, we are going to face new logistics challenges. Mobilization and logistics are not the same thing, but they are too closely related to address one without reference to the other. We are dealing with logistics in peacetime on terms that simply will not work in war, no matter how well we do in mobilizing.

In war, we will be unable to support combat forces by flying out expensive spare parts, one or two at a time, as we do now. The standard manufacturing approach to inventory control for peacetime cost savings, borrowed from Japanese industry, is the “just-in-time” concept, in which parts and subcomponents arrive where they are needed just as they are needed, rather than lying in inventory and imposing carrying costs on subcontractors and prime contractors. This will not serve under wartime conditions of any significant duration. Moreover, as mentioned, we now depend on foreign suppliers for critical components of primary weapon systems. At present we do not even know the full extent to which this is so, although it is heartening to know that the Pentagon at last is trying to establish ground truth in this area.*

Apart from mobilization concerns, such considerations raise a new class of strategic choices for American policymakers. Would we be better off spending billions of dollars to buy forces that would keep the sea and air corridors open between the United States and key foreign partners in our military/economic infrastructure, or in spending them to recreate in the continental United States the capacity to make what we might need? This and other strategic choices need fully developed analysis, not hip-shot answers.

- While there is widespread recognition that we are likely to fight more limited wars and few if any wars over the central East-West axis, there is

*One of the first works to call attention to this situation was an advanced research paper written at the Naval War College in 1986 by Major Betty J. Price, U.S. Air Force. The paper (classified confidential) had an unclassified title: “Dimensions of Dependence: U.S./Japanese Military-Economic Relations.”

little understanding that limited war will impose unprecedented geographical, legal, and economic disparities domestically as well as in the alliance. In limited wars or contingencies, we will need some partners more than others, some industries more than others, and some companies—perhaps even individuals—more than others. We must begin working out and working on such understandings well before they become contentious in difficult and time-constrained circumstances.

Conclusions

In the next decade, mobilization issues are going to continue to increase in importance because of new strategies, contracting and changing military forces and relationships, new political-military-economic circumstances, and new technologies coupled with new technical requirements.

For some years to come, because of shifting relationships between economic and military components of power and influence, it is going to be possible to be an economic power without having significant military power, or to wield great political influence without corresponding military weight, but not possible to be economically weak (or so perceived) and be militarily strong and politically influential. This means that mobilization issues cannot be treated apart from those of economic competitiveness, trade relations, and technological leadership in critical areas.

U.S. active-duty forces are certain to become smaller, with the primary reductions coming from forward-deployed air and ground units, and in various categories of nuclear forces. This suggests that remaining forces are going to have to become more survivable, more versatile, and more mobile. They will also have to become more capable of operating with less extensive in-place infrastructure such as the forces in Europe and Korea, for example, have always counted on.

In crisis or in war, we cannot afford to have national priorities set by state and local governments, or sectors and segments of industry; especially in limited war calling for partial mobilization, there are likely to be significant problems in this regard. It follows, therefore, that in peace we must set at national levels the priorities having most to do with our ability to meet national needs under stress.

Recommendations

The Bush administration should establish an assistant secretary-level group with broad enough participation and a broad enough charter to integrate the political, economic, and military factors that are increasing the need for more sophisticated mobilization policies and capabilities.

The federal government should take the lead in, and give high priority to, developing the federal-state-local government and industry links and shared perspectives necessary for effectiveness as mobilization needs change, especially those having differential effects in each of these sectors (such as those accompanying a limited war).

We must raise up a generation of military officers and civilian counterparts who understand the strategic as well as operational implications of mobilization (and therefore logistic) prospects, and who know how to fight under such constraints. It is not enough to do war gaming and analysis that indicates when critical items might become unavailable; it is essential as well to think about framing strategies and fighting operationally with the initial knowledge of your limits. Sun Tzu wrote centuries ago that "when one's stores are not up to par, he should not engage the enemy." But the choice of not engaging is not always available, with the result that we may be unable to fight according to preferred strategies, standard doctrine, and optimal tactics. We need to have thought through how to fight a war in which we may, indeed will, not have everything we might like—not at the outset, and perhaps never along the way.

We must configure our logistics system in peace more as it will have to work in war.

We must, through gaming and other forms of analysis, determine how to protect the distributed infrastructure on which we have come to depend, as well as the access routes that make it truly an infrastructure and not simply a problem. Ideas about strategic reach need to go beyond thinking about carrying the fight to the enemy. Reach is essential to protecting and exploiting our current infrastructure, and it will be required to an even greater degree by the turn of the century. We need to understand the implications of possible asymmetrical shortfalls, for we will surely not run out of everything at the same time. Through inadequate study of this class of issues, we could find ourselves in effect disaggregating our own combined arms capabilities.

As our forces contract in size, and some are withdrawn from forward-deployed positions, we must in the course of arms control negotiations, whatever their nature, protect as much infrastructure as possible. Early U.S. proposals for withdrawal of forward Soviet forces in Europe have called for virtually complete dismantlement of associated infrastructure. This needs to be reconsidered as our understanding of next-generation mobilization issues improves, and we need to perform such analyses with due care. (In short, we must start now on this work.)

We need to reconsider the relative merits of "going hot" in more than one theater at once (a favorite strategic concept of the early and middle 1980s). While this nation has had the experience of fighting in more than one major theater at once, it has had no experience in doing this by starting in all of them at the same time, or without prolonged preparation for large-scale war.

One reason why the great cross-channel invasion of 1944 was postponed for two years was because it was not possible to fight there, in North Africa, in Italy, and in the Pacific at the same level of intensity at the same time.

War on enemy infrastructure needs both more attention than it has received so far and fundamental reconsideration to the extent that it has been contemplated. Although not usually described in these terms, evolving concepts of deeper and deeper strikes behind the front and development of weapons for doing so, while classic as counteroffensives to deprive the enemy of his ability to continue conflict, are no more and no less than war on infrastructure. We have done very little thinking about the consequences of such strategies being exercised against us. But recent work on energy and other vulnerabilities in the United States and Europe, to mention only two places, indicates clearly both how easy and how devastating such actions against us and our allies could be.

As our forces become smaller and fewer of them remain forward, our ability, both real and perceived, to mobilize effectively for modern combat under changing circumstances will become an essential component of deterrence—a point that it would be difficult to overstate. We must therefore accord this work the time, resources, high profile and priority it needs to contribute to stable deterrence.

While we face great change and challenge in the many aspects of next-generation mobilization concerns, there is room for optimism as well as dismay. Early in 1988 Henry Kissinger remarked that “given the relative economic positions of the two sides it must be easier for the Democracies to preserve the global balance of power than for the Soviet Union to upset it.” Americans have a cultural penchant for problem-solving that remains a great strength, as does the nation’s talent for innovation and tolerance of both change and diversity.

Our greatest risk is that of becoming discouraged in the absence of ready solutions to the problems before us, or becoming complacent in the premature belief that the problems have in fact been solved. The composer Beethoven once said that “composers never finish their works; they just give up.” We may never truly “finish” working on mobilization issues of the next generation, but we cannot afford to give up. Continuing, not transient, attention to mobilization matters will remain vital to maintaining safe, stable strategic relationships with smaller forces in a less nuclear world.

