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The U.S. Marine Corps and Defense Unification, 1944-47: The Politics of Survival

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Keiser, Gordon W. *The US Marine Corps and Defense Unification, 1944-47: The Politics of Survival*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1982. 172pp. \$4.50

In view of current moves to reorganize the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the direction of the War Department's original plan, Colonel Keiser's monograph is particularly timely reading. However, Marine Corps survivors of the Capitol Hill Wars of 1944-52 may be horrified to read one of his conclusions: "It is doubly ironic that the single chief of staff-general staff concept, the military united front that the Marine Corps so bitterly opposed in 1944-47, may now be the only feasible way to redress the present civil-military imbalance where civilians make military decisions and officers make civilian ones." (p. 133)

Keiser's main themes are "centralization versus decentralization in the defense structure, the role of military lobbying and the relationship between the Marine Corps on one hand, and Congress and its constituency on the other."

Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall fired the opening round in the unification battle on 2 November 1943 with his memorandum to the Joint Chiefs of Staff calling for "a single department of war in the post war period." Marshall's *single department* was to be under a civilian secretary and would consist of four Services: the Army, Navy, a separate Air Force, and a Supply Service. Each of the four services would have its own military

chief of staff. These four service chiefs, together with a chief of staff to the President, would head up a "United States General Staff."

The Marine Corps was not mentioned in the memorandum.

Marshall's proposals found their way to Capitol Hill. In March 1944 the House created a Select Committee on Postwar Military Policy chaired by Representative Clifton A. Woodrum. Lieutenant General Joseph McNarney briefed the War Department plan. Congressman Melvin Maas, a long-time member of the Marine Corps Reserve, questioned McNarney as to the place of the Marine Corps in the proposed postwar defense structure. McNarney dismissed the Marine Corps' future as a "detail of organization."

McNarney's off-hand remark was evidence to Marine Corps' thinkers that the Army, institutionally never friendly to the Marine Corps, was pursuing the tactic of assuming away the Marine Corps as a subordinate part of the Navy and therefore beneath the level of detail appropriate to the hearings. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, Lieutenant General Alexander A. Vandegrift, in testifying before the Woodrum Committee, hammered home that the Marine Corps was a "component of the Naval Service," rather than a part of the US Navy. A friendly question gave him the opportunity to go on record that the Marine Corps had no representation on the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Partially in preparation for these hearings, Vandegrift had named

Lieutenant Colonel Merrill Twining, who had been his operations officer at Guadalcanal, to head a "Marine Corps Board" at Quantico which was to explore amphibious concepts and do postwar planning. From then until the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, Twining's board, known to the inner circle as the "Chowder and Marching Society," would be the Corps' think tank for the unification debates.

Vandegrift's thinkers piously proclaimed the proposed national general staff as being perilously close in pattern to the German General Staff, an organizational concept which had contributed to Germany's disastrous defeats in two World Wars. More parochially, they saw the War Department plan as a calculated threat to the survival of the Corps.

Vandegrift, Twining, *et al.* believed that the Army plan, and specifically the Collins plan, as articulated by Lieutenant General J. Lawton Collins on 30 October 1945 before the Senate Military Affairs Committee, would reduce the Marine Corps to "little more than an auxiliary police force." This Vandegrift saw as "the first step in the total abolition of the Corps." Such an Army intention was almost impossible to document until March 1946 when a memorandum tabled at the JCS by Army Chief of Staff General Dwight D. Eisenhower fell into the hands of Brigadier General Merritt A. Edson. (Edson had commanded the 1st Raider Battalion and later the 5th Marines under Vandegrift at

Guadalcanal.) Eisenhower's memorandum conceded the need for small, lightly armed Marine units to protect American interests in foreign countries and to guard naval ships and installations, but "once Marine units attain such a size as to require the combining of arms to accomplish their missions, they are assuming and duplicating the functions of the Army and we have in effect two land armies."

Vandegrift appeared before the Senate Naval Affairs Committee on 6 May 1946 in hearings being held on the Thomas Bill, the latest variant of the War Department plan. Making it plain once again that the Marines had no representation on the JCS, he stated that the bill would mean in all probability the extinction of the Marine Corps. Revealing the existence of the Eisenhower memorandum, he closed dramatically: "The bended knee is not a tradition of our Corps. If the Marine as a fighting man has not made a case for himself after 170 years of service, he must go. But I think you will agree with me that he has earned the right to depart with dignity and honor, not by subjugation to the status of uselessness and servility planned for him by the War Department."

During the last months of 1946, at President Truman's direction, Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal and Secretary of the Army Robert P. Patterson resolved most of the essential differences in the Army and Navy approaches to unification. The Navy's greatest concern was the preservation of carrier aviation. The

resulting Forrestal-Patterson agreement disturbed Vandegrift greatly. Instead of providing that the functions and duties of all the Services be written into the basic law, the agreement left these to be defined by executive order. Vandegrift and his stalwarts perceived the Navy as willing to sacrifice the Corps to save naval aviation.

To prepare himself for the next round of Congressional hearings, Vandegrift formed a new "Board to Conduct Research and Prepare Material in Connection with Pending Legislation," less ponderously known as the "Edson-Thomas Board" for its two senior members, Brigadier Generals Edson and Gerald C. Thomas. (Thomas had been Vandegrift's chief of staff on Guadalcanal.) The third ranking member was the ubiquitous Colonel Twining.

Marine Corps objectives with regard to the impending National Security Act were about as follows:

- Continuance of the Service secretaries, preferably with Cabinet rank.
- Avoidance of a single chief of staff.
- Statutory protection for the Marine Corps including a voice in the JCS and preservation of Marine Corps aviation.

The National Security Act of 1947 as finally passed by the Congress and approved by the President met most of these objectives. Particularly important to the Corps was the language stipulating that the Corps included "fleet marine forces of

combined arms, together with supporting air components."

However, the Marine Corps was still left without a voice in the JCS. This would come, at first, as legislated in 1952, limited to matters of direct Marine Corps concern, and then full membership in 1978.

Keiser began this study as his master's thesis in 1971 while a graduate student in political science at Tufts University and completed it some ten years later while a student at the National War College.

In his last paragraph he leaves us with a thought to be remembered. The fight for survival has been invaluable, he says, in one respect: "The doubt, apprehension, and sheer exertion have served to keep the Corps introspective, organizationally lean, and rooted in traditional military values."

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Wheeler, Richard. *A Special Valor—The U.S. Marines and the Pacific War*. New York: Harper and Row, 1983. 448pp. \$24.95

Richard Wheeler, who fought and was wounded at Iwo Jima in 1945, has written a good series of short stories about most of the Pacific island battles fought by the US Marine Corps during World War Two. Unfortunately, the book claims to be about the entire Marine effort in the Pacific War—by its own measure it is disappointing. Although the book follows the different battles fought by the Marines, one after the other, it is