

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 11
Number 1 *Parameters* 1981

Article 8

7-4-1981

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John J. Fialka

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Recommended Citation

John J. Fialka, "THE PENTAGON'S EXERCISE, 'PROUD SPIRIT': LITTLE CAUSE FOR PRIDE," *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (1981), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1243.

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THE PENTAGON'S EXERCISE 'PROUD SPIRIT': LITTLE CAUSE FOR PRIDE

by

JOHN J. FIALKA

The Department of Defense has experienced another reverse in its testing of the processes by which the federal government would mobilize itself and the nation for a major war. In a command post exercise called "Proud Spirit," conducted during the period 6-26 November of last year, the Pentagon and 35 other federal agencies simulated a national mobilization in response to a major world crisis. Severe shortcomings were experienced, including:¹

- A major failure of the computer-driven Worldwide Military Command and Control System (WWMCCS) that left military commanders without essential information concerning the readiness of their units for 12 hours during the height of the "crisis" as Pentagon programmers found themselves locked out of one of their own computers.

- A huge shortfall of ammunition and military equipment that are supposed to be in the war reserve stocks in Europe. The shortfall was far beyond the military's capability to correct during the 20-day exercise.

- A shortage of 350,000 trained soldiers needed to fill units leaving the United States and an inability to bring Army units in Germany up to their authorized wartime strength to meet the crisis.

- Evidence that the US industrial capability to resupply the armed forces with

basic items of military hardware such as tanks and ammunition continues to decline.

- A continuing failure of high-level civilian agency executives to interest themselves in their agencies' mobilization roles. Among eight major agencies needed to carry out a mobilization for war, not one responded to an invitation to send the top executive officer—the agency secretary—to a two-hour briefing on Proud Spirit.

Proud Spirit and its civilian counterpart, "Rex 80 Bravo," comprise an updated version of a 1978 exercise called "Nifty Nugget," the first simulated government-wide war mobilization effort since the real thing during World War II.² Nifty Nugget revealed enormous shortfalls in munitions, equipment, manpower, planning, and the corporate memory of the Pentagon, which disinterred its mobilization plans only to see them fall apart under the stringent demands of the short-warning war now envisioned by many military analysts. On the screens of the computer terminals used during Nifty Nugget to simulate the pressures of such a mobilization, an army of some 400,000 of the best-trained soldiers in the United States was sent to the plains of Central Europe. It probably died there. Although it had been equipped with some of the most high-technology weaponry on the planet, it did not have enough of those mundane but essential items of war such as shells, missiles, fuel,

food, spare parts, and replacements to survive more than a few weeks. As one planner later put it, "The Army was simply attrited to death."

The first returns from Proud Spirit—which is still being studied in detail—indicate that while the "crisis" simulated was made somewhat easier, the shortages, the confusion, and many of the dismal results that attended Nifty Nugget were reenacted. Defense Department officials would not discuss Proud Spirit. "We can't really talk about that yet," said Tom Ross, the outgoing Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs. "This is just too sensitive a time," he added, referring to the presidential transition. The indications are, however, that the Pentagon has seen better days than those experienced during Proud Spirit. According to retired General Walter T. Kerwin, former Army Vice Chief of Staff, who led the team of retired military officials asked to oversee the game for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "There is a doubt in my mind, in view of our generalized objectives, as to whether we obtained success."³

One of the major lessons of Nifty Nugget was that computerized mobilization plans, programmed to disgorge a whole chain of orders to units and their transportation, become difficult to deal with when the war scenario diverges from the one envisioned. For example, six full days of airlift were lost in Nifty Nugget when the plans had to be removed from the computer and recalculated by hand after their interrelationship was destroyed by an unexpected decision to redeploy a Marine unit to Iceland.

One result was that a new Defense entity—the Joint Deployment Agency—was created to review existing plans and repackage them in segments so that sudden changes would not unravel the whole system. While the Joint Deployment Agency has reportedly made considerable headway, it has evidently not gone far enough to satisfy General Kerwin, who once witnessed the real thing as a young officer on the staff of General George C. Marshall. The joint deployment system "is pasted together," said General Kerwin. Further,

There is a doubt that it could handle the requirements of a mobilization. It needs a roll-up of units into composite bundles; it needs a system design; it needs a program budget manager; it needs to be exercised . . . The system is undisciplined. It has too much information at the top and needs to be decentralized. It needs senior people, not Automated Data Processing people, to make a determination as to what requirements need to be entered into the system.

The emotional high point of Proud Spirit, according to some of the players involved, was the failure of one of the major sub-systems of WWMCCS, believed to be the largest and most expensive computer system in the world. "WWMCCS just fell flat on its ass," was the way one of them put it.

One of the functions of WWMCCS is to give top generals and admirals an up-to-the-moment report on the readiness of their units; however, the computer sub-system in charge of doing that during Proud Spirit became overloaded with queries. The updated information was shunted into an interim memory bank called a "buffer" while computer specialists waited for the traffic to subside. When the time came for the buffer to feed the information back into WWMCCS, however, it balked. The result was that the Army's manpower and equipment-related computer systems went silent for six hours while programmers struggled frantically to find the right code sequence that would

John J. Fialka is a national reporter for *The Washington Star*, covering national security affairs. He is a graduate of Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa; the Georgetown University Law Center; and the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. Mr. Fialka began his journalism career with *The Baltimore Sun* in 1965. While there he became a member of the Maryland Bar. He began working for *The Washington Star* in 1967 as a general assignment reporter, joining the national affairs staff in the mid-Seventies.



release the information. The information was retrieved 12 hours later, but by that time most of it was outdated. After that, the system went on in fits and starts, providing instructions in some instances too early. Air Force transports, for example, were given simulated orders to land at military bases two days before the troops assigned to board them were given the order to deploy.

There are indications that the computers told top Pentagon planners too much, inundating them with trivia and subordinate matters and obscuring the really tough questions they were supposed to deal with. General Edward C. Meyer, the Army's Chief of Staff, warned planners afterward that "there is more information than we need. We must discipline ourselves to only get at the level of data needed to cause decisions to happen." The answer, according to General Meyer, did not lie in asking Congress to buy more computers:

Clearly we are passing too much data back and forth. If there is any one thing I want to charge the staff with, it is to decide what are the elemental bits of data we need to make the decisions.

The Army's duty to higher civilian officials, General Meyer continued, is to "ensure people are working on the right problems and not the wrong ones."⁴

The Defense Department apparently tried to avoid some of the pitfalls of Nifty Nugget by making the "crisis" envisioned in Proud Spirit somewhat smaller and easier to deal with. Instead of the one-and-a-half war scenario used during the 1978 exercise—which included the opening sequence of a major shooting war in Europe—Proud Spirit posited only a period of rising tension in Europe, but with no shots fired, and a consequent one-war mobilization in the United States.

Unlike Nifty Nugget, in which decisionmakers attempted to deal with the shortfalls of ammunition, the Proud Spirit wargamers assumed that huge amounts of ammunition and equipment had already been

shipped to Europe to replenish US war reserve stocks. According to some Pentagon planners, that is a tall assumption because the war reserve stocks in this country are now so short of their authorized levels. These planners made it clear that this shortfall is not attributable to the Carter Administration alone, but is rather the product of 15 years of neglect, budget-cutting, and lending during the Vietnam War and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. The only form of ammunition the Army has in sufficient quantities to satisfy its NATO mission is, reportedly, rifle ammunition. A further complication is that port and loading facilities are apparently not large enough to handle the sudden surge of mobilization shipments, even if the materials to be shipped were available.

Another problem that emerged during the exercise was the further decline in the capability of US industry to replenish military arsenals with tanks, missiles, aircraft, and ammunition. It now takes longer to order and receive delivery of a tank, for example, than it did during Nifty Nugget. One means considered by Proud Spirit wargamers to meet a shortage of M-16 rifles was to order them from a rifle factory in South Korea.

Unlike Nifty Nugget, the rising tensions that triggered Proud Spirit never actually escalated to the point of war. That made the Army's manpower situation a great deal more manageable because Army planners would have been unable to provide 20,000 combat-trained soldiers needed to bring America's NATO divisions up to what the Army calls "ALO-1," their authorized wartime strength levels. Further, since there was no combat there were no casualties to be treated in the Army's medical system. This was also fortunate since planners had stripped US bases of nearly all medical personnel to fill up vacancies in Europe.

Huge gaps in the Army reserve systems showed up, as they did in Nifty Nugget, leaving the overall Army some 350,000 men short of mobilization goals. "About the only thing we learned between this game and the last," noted one player, "was how to spread our shortages around a little better."

The civilian side of Proud Spirit was coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Of this Agency, General Kerwin remarked that

A gap still exists between Office of the Secretary of Defense requirements and FEMA's capabilities. FEMA and Defense don't speak the same language. FEMA isn't organized to handle the requirements or to exercise defense priorities established by the President.

One exercise assumption that made the civilian side of Proud Spirit considerably easier was that 60 percent of the hundreds of thousands of US citizens in Europe had somehow gotten the notion to come home before the evacuation had to begin. During Nifty Nugget a major foul-up occurred because an employee in charge of the evacuation plan in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare—which is responsible for handling civilian evacuees once they arrive in the United States—retired shortly before the exercise. As a result, the players saw some 900,000 civilians being deposited at US Army bases, right in the middle of deployment operations. It is not clear just what happened to the civilian evacuation plan during Proud Spirit, although it is an understatement to observe that things did not go as well as General Kerwin had hoped for. Civilian planners in the exercise said they had “some doubts” whether Health and Human Services had adequately carried out its part in Proud Spirit. A Health and Human Services spokesman insisted, however, that the agency had simulated the reception and processing of some 300,000 evacuees at bases in Texas. Frank A. Camm, an associate director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, refused to comment on the civilian side of Proud Spirit in detail until the critiques on the exercise are completed. “The exercise seemed to highlight the fact that we just have a long way to go,” he said.

One improvement noted in Proud Spirit was that many more lower-level civilian players were involved than was the case in

Nifty Nugget—where civilian noninvolvement was a major problem. But the lack of participation by top-level agency officials continued to be a problem. Although some cabinet-level Carter Administration officials accepted invitations to participate in a two-hour planning session in which they could “play” some of the crises of Proud Spirit, they later backed out on learning that other agencies would send lower-level officials. Some of them, reportedly, excused their absence by pointing to their lame-duck status. (The game began two days after the 4 November election.) One of the key planners of the exercise, however, was not happy with this explanation. “I frankly think it is inexcusable that top members of this government or any administration do not know their jobs in an emergency of the type that we're talking about,” he said.

Among the civilian agencies involved were the Departments of Health and Human Services, Energy, Treasury, Transportation, Commerce, Interior, and Labor. Most of them sent deputy assistant secretary-level people. One exception was the Department of Defense—Under Secretary Robert Komer, Defense's third-ranking official, played the role of the Secretary of Defense at the outset of the game.

In summary, the results of Exercise Proud Spirit 1980, like those of Nifty Nugget 1978, revealed that the mobilization potential of the United States in response to a NATO military crisis continues to be woefully inadequate. It will be interesting to see how much real progress will be achieved by the new Administration in repairing long-term mobilization deficiencies.

NOTES

1. This article elaborates on views first reported by this author in “US Again Fails Test of Ability to Mobilize,” *The Washington Star*, 21 December 1980, pp. A1, A6.
2. See John J. Fialka, “The Grim Lessons of Nifty Nugget,” *Army*, 30 (April 1980), 14-18.
3. Comments at MOBEX-80 briefing, 25 November 1980. Subsequent quotations of General Kerwin are also from this briefing.
4. Comments at MOBEX-80 briefing, 25 November 1980.