

The Left and the Military

by Charles Knight, *Dissent*, Fall 1994

The American left has proved very adept at identifying and opposing the misuse of American military power and the distortion of national priorities that defense spending has entailed.

Despite the left's consistent attention to military matters, it lacks a coherent approach to military policy. Mostly, the left has an inclination toward military issues -- and that inclination has been fairly consistently anti-military. This does not preclude banging the drum occasionally for select interventions. But it does mean that whenever the left relates to military policy, it relates as an outsider; and it relates as though the realm of military policy is unremittingly hostile to progressive values. This article will argue that a positive progressive military policy is both possible and necessary -- necessary both to achieve progressive goals and to the credibility of the left in American politics.

This article takes as a premise that there are instances in which a resort to military force is justified and that the problem of war does not arise solely or ultimately from the policies of any single state or group of states. Instead, the most fundamental of conditions that contribute to the occurrence of war is the anarchic international system in which states are free to pursue or defend their perceived interests by means of military force. Within this system, all states, big and small, have some degree of basic insecurity.

This article also assumes that the mere existence of "mitigating factors" cannot excuse aggression, or strip a nation of its right to self-defense, or relieve a group of nations of the moral responsibility to aid victims of aggression. Hence, in this view, it would have been proper for the United States, France, and England to come to the aid of Poland when it was attacked by Nazi Germany even though the Polish regime was at the time a dictatorship and even though the US, France, and England were far short of benevolent in their international relations.

All of these assumptions are debatable, especially from the perspectives of pacifism and some types of anti-imperialism. However, this article will not argue

these assumptions. Readers who are willing to entertain them may find value in what follows; those who are not may be in for a vexing ride. Either way, the point of posing these assumptions is not to write progressive politics out of the realm of military policy, but rather to write them in. This article argues that the intricacies of military policy offer ample and fruitful opportunities for applying progressive perspectives.

A telling illustration of the loss when progressive politics remains outside the military policy debate can be found in the 1992 national military strategy, drafted under the direction of Colin Powell while serving under George Bush. The Clinton Pentagon has made only minor changes.

Although the national strategy makes passing reference to the importance of multinational alliances and UN mandates, it is fundamentally a unilateral strategy. By calling for the capacity to fight two major wars without reliance on significant allied and coalitional help, the strategy resulted in a requirement for very large US forces. Setting goals of extraordinarily quick, decisive victory, requires an emphasis on active duty forces and massive strategic lift.

National strategies, by design, are very general statements, allowing for flexible interpretation. But they also set the framework for debate on most aspects of military policy. Before he released his "Bottom-Up Review" of military requirements last year, Les Aspin floated the idea of a "win-hold-win" sequencing of the two-war strategy. This strategic formulation was reflective of the low probabilities of two concurrent wars and suggestive of the wide latitude for slowing the pace of the wars should they occur. It could have had real meaning in derivative force sizes and composition. However, Aspin was immediately attacked from the right, and he retreated to a formula of "fighting and winning two wars near simultaneously."

Defensive wars are almost always fought in a "hold-win" sequence; the allied strategy in WWII is a prominent 20th Century example. Seeking the capacity for an early offensive "win" option in two theaters is radically ambitious and extravagant. One measure of this ambition is the current plans to deploy a force of nearly five Army divisions anywhere in the world in eight weeks. Operation Desert Storm was the fastest large-scale logistics feat in history; it took twelve weeks to deploy the Desert Storm force. The new strategy seeks to best that by one-third.

Given the low level of objective threats to US interests in the post-cold war world and mindful of the other high-priority national needs, there is a large area of

reasonable strategy options for the left to counterpoise. The left, however, remains conspicuously absent from the policy discussion. By default, conservatives with their allies in the military have controlled a soporific public debate about the great question of what post-cold war national strategy should be.

Toward a Progressive Military Policy

Several goals would distinguish a progressive military policy. The first is an effort to effect structural guarantees that armed forces will be properly used, with restraint and for truly defensive ends. Second, is an effort to ensure that the requirement of a well-provisioned and well-functioning military is met in ways consistent with progress toward other positive national goals -- such as fiscal responsibility and the funding of human needs. Finally, a progressive military policy would aim to meet today's defense needs in ways that help create global conditions in which nations can confidently attempt a general demilitarization.

The left has often stood ready to restrain military power, cut military spending, and support the evolution of alternative global and nonmilitary security mechanisms. The point made here, however, is that progress toward these ends (1) requires a comprehensive engagement with military policy, and (2) cannot be achieved apart from an effort to ensure that the military remains able to fulfill the fundamental function of deterring and defeating aggression.

The US military is a very large, multipurpose, and complex institution. The set of policies applicable to it is correspondingly large and complex, covering issues of national military strategy, doctrine, operational concepts, force size, force structure, roles, missions, military modernization, and personnel. This article will not attempt to review the breadth of military policy, but instead, examine several policy debates and options that illustrate the importance and potential of a progressive intervention in military policy.

There is no tradition in the American left of discussing military structure, doctrine, roles, and missions -- although it is at this level of discourse that military capabilities and budgets are determined. Left opposition to military priorities has most often been expressed as a consistent opposition to new weapon purchases. This may be because Congress, which has the responsibility for provisioning the armed forces, is the branch of the federal government most open to the left's influence. However, without a comprehensive vision of how a military should operate, budget-cutting arguments can only muster issues of cost and performance

and remain fundamentally weak. Worse yet, applied with the type of determination necessary to achieve very substantial savings, they can give the appearance of a lack of concern for the lives of American soldiers and the security of the nation.

As suggested above, a truly effective effort to achieve any positive end in the realm of military policy must respect this area of policy as an integrated whole. Two current issues illustrate this point:

- the question of "active-reserve mix" in the US military;
- and the debate over armed forces roles and missions.

The Future of America's Armed Forces Reserves

Only recently has the US maintained large professional standing armies in peacetime. After WWII, large Soviet forces remained in Eastern Europe. To offer credible support for the defense of Western Europe, the US needed large active duty forces that could move into combat in days and weeks and not the months it would take to mobilize and deploy reserve forces. The dissolution of the Soviet threat makes it reasonable to transfer a significant portion of the force structure to the reserves. Nonetheless, current planning keeps the active force component at nearly the same proportion as during the Cold War; it will move down only three percent from its 1990 level of 65%.

The proponents of large active forces who now dominate policymaking argue that the reserves are well suited to support and service missions, but are not prepared for combat maneuver missions if they must be deployed in the first several months of a crisis. The underlying planning assumption is that large combat forces must be ready to go on the offensive early in a future war. However, in the new threat environment, even significantly smaller active forces can hold a defensive line until reserves are ready to deploy. Given current geostrategic conditions, there is no good reason to accelerate war plans to the extent that they preclude greater reliance on reserves.

The continuing emphasis on active duty forces is flawed and dangerous. In opposition to this, there is an opportunity to speak out for the ideal of a citizen's army or militia - in today's form, the National Guard and other service reserves. Putting more of the US force structure in reserves would not only save tens of billions of dollars a year, it would also put a democratic constraint on the capacity

of political leaders to go to war without the backing of the American people. In other words, a greater reliance on the Reserves would serve the goals of both economy and democracy.

The Roles and Mission Debate

Closely related to the issue of active-reserve "force mix" is the issue of armed forces roles and missions. This generally refers to the allocation of combat tasks, objectives, and responsibilities among the various service branches or their subordinate units. Defining roles and missions is particularly important in evaluating structural redundancies among the services.

While progressives have remained fixated on achieving savings by challenging the cost-effectiveness of individual weapon systems, they pay far less attention to the much larger problem of structural redundancy among the services. Emblematic of this problem is the existence of four US air forces. In his 1993 review of roles and missions, General Colin Powell used a semantic distinction to dismiss the issue, stating that "America has one air force -- the US Air Force... other services have aviation arms." But few nations have air forces as large as the "aviation arms" of the US Navy and Marine Corps. And few nations have armies as large as America's second army -- the Marine Corps.

Behind the problem of redundancy is the issue of service autonomy and rivalry. Being a good chairman, General Powell sought to close an issue that could set off a revolt of generals and admirals. From the perspective of national interest, however, a continuation of the status quo has nothing to do with maintaining a quality fighting force and everything to do with squandering scarce resources. Addressing the problems of service autonomy, rivalry, and redundancy would simultaneously serve the goals of lowering defense expenditures and fielding an effective fighting force. It also opens avenues to debate national strategy and the proper use of military forces.

Multinational Operations and the Future Role of the UN

When and how military forces are used is the area of military policy that stimulates the greatest interest on the left. But the left response has been largely reactive and almost always negative, usually denying a positive role for US

military power in the world. Many on the left, however, admit exceptions: the Second World War, or, currently, intervention in Bosnia or Haiti. Suppose indeed there are, from a progressive perspective, instances when the resort to military action is justified. In that case, it is incumbent on the left to join the debate on when and how military forces should be used.

Today that debate is more open than at any time in recent history. The Gulf War marked a new, although fragile, precedent for large-scale US interventions. Despite the continuing preference of US leaders for the freedom of unilateral action, the fact of America's declining economic power and global trends toward interdependent international relations makes multilateralism an increasingly attractive norm in the post-cold war era. This will mean that the US will try to organize coalitions or rely on alliances to pursue large-scale interventions.

Acknowledging the obvious problems of big power dominance in emerging multilateralism is a positive direction for US foreign policy. With more countries involved in coalition decision-making, war objectives will likely be more limited and the frequency of large-scale intervention lower. Through the practice of multilateralism, norms of intervention and coalition warfare will develop. However, at first, these will not be codified as law or applied with equanimity. Nevertheless, a process that moves beyond the singular prerogative of US power toward global norms of acceptable interstate behavior represents progress and a significant opening for the left.

The next level of development of a responsible global security apparatus may be the creation of a multinational "peacemaking" force under UN command. However, the UN is today far from ready to assume and perform well in the type of role that would mark a qualitative advance toward dependable international stability and peace. And most nations are not yet prepared to cede such a role to the UN; A host of serious practical problems contribute to blocking consensus on moving forward. Unless the practical issues are addressed, the prospects for a significant global peacemaking force will quickly wither under a barrage of "realist" skepticism.

Among the problems facing a UN command are issues of command and control, doctrine, division of labor, and interoperability among diverse national armed forces. Would a UN force that is truly multinational, both in composition and command, prove able to act in an efficient, effective, and timely fashion? An affirmative answer is possible, but it depends on deepening the discussion of

organizational and operational issues.

So far, the "realist" and "unilateralist" opposition to UN development has monopolized the discussion of these issues. Progressives, by contrast, have been badly overtaken by events. Although often supportive of nations' greater reliance on the UN, the left has been unable to address substantively many of the practical problems that recent experience has revealed.

Defensive Restructuring

In international relations theory, the security dilemma posits that measures to improve one nation's security will tend to diminish another's security. This is particularly true if nation A's defense strategy calls for a retaliatory offensive against the territory and assets of nation B. Strong offensive capabilities may make nation A feel more secure, but it will make nation B feel less secure, with a number of undesirable consequences:

- 1) interstate tensions will increase if nation B reciprocates with an offensive strategy of its own;
- 2) military instability will grow as disproportionate investments in offensive capabilities make the defenses of both nations less reliable; and
- 3) military competition will stimulate the increased acquisition of armaments and increased investment in military technology.

Defensive restructuring seeks to alleviate the security dilemma by limiting a nation's capabilities for cross-border attack, improving its capacity to resist aggression, and decoupling it from competitive offensive arms racing. The concept of a defensively-oriented military embodies a break with the dominant trend in security policy, which stresses punitive deterrence and, in the event of war, a quick transition to large-scale offensive action. By contrast, a defensively structured military would seek to deter aggression principally by lowering an aggressor's probability of success. If deterrence fails, it seeks to contain and exhaust aggression while avoiding escalation.

By relinquishing the threat of large-scale cross-border offensive action and avoiding the risks inherent to such action, a defensive defense lessens the danger of preemption in a crisis and reduces the pressures for escalation. In this way, it increases the scope of diplomacy and helps create an atmosphere of trust without compromising the capacity for defense. Moreover, because this approach seeks to

build on the inherent strengths of a defensive posture, it can provide security at a lower cost.

Defensive restructuring is not, primarily, a matter of banning classes of "offensive weaponry". An effective armed force needs to be able to carry out tactical defense and offense and must have the requisite units, weaponry, and training. What determines the overall defensiveness or offensiveness of the force is how the units are put together, their proportions, the operational doctrine, and the national strategy. This is a complex set, but it is not so complex that it defies meaningful analysis or policy development.

There are several avenues of defensive restructuring which can be encouraged through arms control, arms transfer, and military assistance policies. First, nations can move in informal concert to modernize their armed forces along nonoffensive lines. Second, nations can negotiate measures of arms reduction that selectively limit those weapons and equipment most vital to large-scale offensive action. Finally, arms exporting nations can agree to limit the transfer of offense-oriented systems, while leaving uncontrolled the transfer of systems vital to a more narrowly defined defense.

Comprehensive defensive restructuring for global or inter-regional military powers, such as the United States, Britain, France, or Russia, is a special issue. Their militaries all have the capacity to "project" power far from their borders - a primary offensive characteristic. Rigorous defensive restructuring would involve a very dramatic rollback in their capabilities and entail their abstention from unilateral military activism. This is an appealing goal, but its realization will likely require both the prior evolution of effective global security agencies and a broad-based defensive restructuring of national militaries.

Nonetheless, the major powers could begin limiting their power projection forces in a number of stabilizing ways. Such forces could be re-fashioned for "defensive support" missions with the aim of bolstering the defenses of smaller nations threatened by aggression. To address concerns about military hegemony, the major powers could design their defensive support units to be structurally dependent on the defensive array and infrastructure of host nations. Among other things, this means emphasizing combat support elements, rather than self-contained offensive maneuver units. Such a shift from traditional power projection to defensive support would also make superfluous much of the existing military capabilities for forced entry. These derive from large naval and long-range tactical air forces, airborne army corps, amphibious assault units, and large special

operations forces. As a further confidence-building measure, such defensive support missions should be strictly multinational in character and increasingly under the auspices of global agencies.

Political Importance of Military Policy

Historically, the American left has played a leading role in objecting to the abusive exercise of American military power. On several occasions, its efforts have made a critical difference: Vietnam being the most prominent recent example. While these efforts to deny options to political elites have been partially successful, they have not born lasting improvements in the credibility or political prospects of the left. Political advancement of the left requires supplementing its familiar reactive stance of protest with a positive vision of a military policy for the US.

Today a centrist Democrat occupies the White House. His defense policies are barely distinguishable from those of his conservative Republican predecessor. The election to the presidency of a progressive who would set a fundamentally different course is a distant prospect. But we can be certain no progressive will be elected without the American people's trust on national security issues. And the American people will not lend their trust unless convinced that the left takes their security concerns seriously.

These concerns do not reflect a simple or precise calculation. In an increasingly interdependent world with rapid communications and travel, even remote threats can seem too close for comfort. This personalized sense of insecurity also stirs a desire for a moral force in the world, something that can act to dispel aggression and the madness of war. Left and right continually contend to define the source of insecurity and the nature of that moral force.

Twice in recent times, the American left succeeded in defining the public terms of security policy discourse. Once was during the Vietnam era, as people began to feel that the real threat was not distant communism, but rather the continuation of a costly and dangerous war that they neither supported nor understood. The other time was during the Freeze movement when people began to perceive that the real threat to life and morality was the nuclear extremism of their own government.

Both the Vietnam war and the Reagan administration's nuclear extremism provided an opening for the left. For the most part, the left has filled this opening with a combination of facile anti-militarism, which asserts that there are no real military security threats, and a reflexive anti-interventionism which seems ready to

abandon weak nations to the aggression of others. To continue to hold fervently to such reactive stances will only serve to undercut the credibility and moral leadership of the left on national security issues.

Today the world stands poised between a past in which nations sought to ensure their security primarily through armed deterrence and exclusive military alliances, and a future in which inclusive global agencies and nonmilitary means can play the leading role in guaranteeing the peace. Yet instability and conflict, both residual and new, continue to beset many regions of the world. What is now required is a transitional security policy that attends to immediate security concerns using the tools at hand, while forging new tools and institutions that can carry the world into a realm of greater freedom.

This article has attempted to illustrate what the left could bring to this critical transition. A comprehensive military policy from the left can assuage people's fears and offer progress toward a higher moral ground. Whether or not the left is up to this challenge depends on its capacity to outgrow its own brand of old thinking.

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