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The Future of U.S. Ground Forces: A Counter View

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During recent testimony on 20 March 2009 before the Airland Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Dr. Andrew Krepinevich of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments provided an interesting perspective on the future of U.S. ground forces. In particular, he noted the declining quality of the U.S. Army, the need to create a bifurcated force or “Dual Surge” force, and criticized the Army as barely being a “jack-of- all- trades” and “master of none.”¹ Several of his characterizations of the Army are debatable and perhaps not taken within the whole context of the U.S. Army’s challenges and experiences.

First, Dr. Krepinevich may not have accurately portrayed one important aspect of the state of the U.S. Army in 2009. While he criticizes the quality of Army leadership in terms of early retirement and departures from the service, the front page of the *USA Today* currently reports a far different perspective. Last month, *USA Today* noted that “The economic downturn is hitting Iraq and Afghanistan veterans harder than other workers – one in nine are out of work - ... and encouraging some troops to remain in service.” Moreover, it states, “Army records show that the service has hit 152% of its reenlistment goal this year... soldiers are reenlisting specifically because of the poor civilian job market.”² Furthermore, an interview with LTC Thomas Erickson, Chief, Enlisted Professional Development Branch, Army G-1 office, revealed that both senior NCO and officer retention numbers have been increasing over the past few years. Interestingly, this data was captured in 2009. Of note, Dr. Krepinevich’s sources for a declining quality of non-commissioned officers and officers came from mid-2008 research before the wide-scale impact of the economic recession. The significant downturn in jobless rates did not begin until late 2008 and became pronounced in early 2009. The argument for a declining quality of the Army branch of military service does not remain valid with regard to 2009 U.S. economic conditions.

Second, Dr. Krepinevich advocates the creation of a bifurcated force: one devoted to irregular warfare and the other to conventional operations. While this advice may appear provocative, it

¹ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Future of U.S. Ground Forces: Testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Airland Subcommittee*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, accessed at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2009/March/Krepinevich%2003-26-09.pdf>, 26 March 2009.

² “Jobless Rate at 11.2% for Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan,” *USA Today*, accessed at http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-03-19-jobless-veterans_N.htm, 20 March 2009.

actually moves in a direction contrary to what field commanders are calling for. Field commanders, to include General David Petraeus and General Ray Odierno, state that every unit must be capable of performing offense, defense and stability tasks simultaneously. This advice has been an outgrowth of their recent experience in Iraq. General Petraeus, former field commander in Iraq, stated in March 2009, “No matter where you are on the spectrum of conflict, you are always doing some mix of those.”³ This statement was based on actual conditions, and not the battle they preferred to fight. Without doubt, many in the Army understand that “tomorrow’s wars will look more like the three-faceted war Petraeus and others see in Iraq.”⁴ Policy makers would benefit immensely by listening to those who have survived in the hostile environment and delivered tactical success.

Third, and as an adjunct to bifurcation, Dr. Krepinevich criticizes the Army’s move towards developing soldiers and leaders that are a “jack of all trades.” In essence, according to him, the US Army cannot seamlessly move from irregular warfare to conventional war because the range of missions is so broad. He uses this argument to call for the development of more specialized forces and the fielding of two specialized surge forces, one for conventional operations and the other for irregular warfare. The end result of this recommendation is an Army force mix of brigade combat teams (BCT) configured along traditional lines (heavy, infantry, or stryker), while creating new security cooperation BCT’s from 15 active and 15 reserve component IBCT’s.

The problem with a bifurcated force is multi-fold. First, Dr. Krepinevich calls for specialization in counterinsurgency. The difference can be akin to comparing the need for “good enough” versus “expert” in a special field. In today’s world, the job skills requirement is moving away from over-specialization to general purpose capability. In the police field, the bulls-eye target was replaced with the large silhouette for good reason. Why overtrain to hit the bulls-eye in a centimeter plot, when hitting a 3 foot target results in a successful engagement? There was no payoff for over-specialization. In the information technology (IT) field, many practitioners have taught themselves to handle multiple types of software packages and protocols. If today’s IT workers try to specialize in only one program, they quickly become irrelevant to the mainstream work force which is expected to learn, adapt, and change IT skill sets every two years. Similarly, today’s U.S. Army soldiers do not need to over-specialize in one skill set in a rapidly changing environment. Whether soldiers are demolition specialists, medical practitioners or logisticians, they can all develop a wide range of basic soldiering skills first and then learn to have a functional specialty for the Army. Over-specialization leads to a large pool of non-deployable soldiers and a narrow rotation policy that is unfair, unaffordable and unsustainable. Finally, there is no clear evidence that the U.S. Army cannot move from irregular to conventional war in a timely fashion. Ask our soldiers returning from Iraq. Hence, the risk to embrace over-specialization cannot be justified based on the Army’s real-world experience.

³ Karen Walker, “Warfighter in Chief – Petraeus Delivers – to Iraqis and his Troops,” *Armed Forces Journal*, accessed at http://74.125.93.104/search?q=cache:K_NkUFdteNcJ:www.afji.com/2008/05/3479700/, 3 March 2009.

⁴ Ibid.

The key to today's challenge is balance. The Army has immersed itself in counterinsurgency while retaining conventional training within its institutional base. The School houses are adjusting to the training and education of counterinsurgency skills. The National Training Center at Fort Irwin continues to provide tough, realistic joint and combined arms training across the spectrum of conflict. Even the combat experience of today's Soldiers has given the organization the largest number of combat veterans not experienced since, perhaps, the Vietnam conflict. The key point is that as the US Army focuses toward an unpredictable future, its training base has been enriched by a wealth of combat experience that will serve well through the next decade. It is critical that the training and doctrinal base continue to preserve the counterinsurgency skills of the last seven years, as well as the conventional skills from pre-2003. To many in the Army, being a "jack of all trades" may prove to be a strength and not a weakness. It may become the hallmark of a modern army in a world of persistent conflict where the survival of the nation is a stark reality. Threats to our national survival versus the threats to our national interests may dictate that the Army should remain equally capable and structured to fight many types of wars. Warfare is warfare; and our Army can benefit most from a full spectrum capable force.

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