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The Myth of American Might

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By Stuart H. Loory

COLUMBUS, Ohio—President Nixon's decision to alert American military forces throughout the world at the height of the Middle Eastern crisis provoked the wrong debate. 25 OCT 73

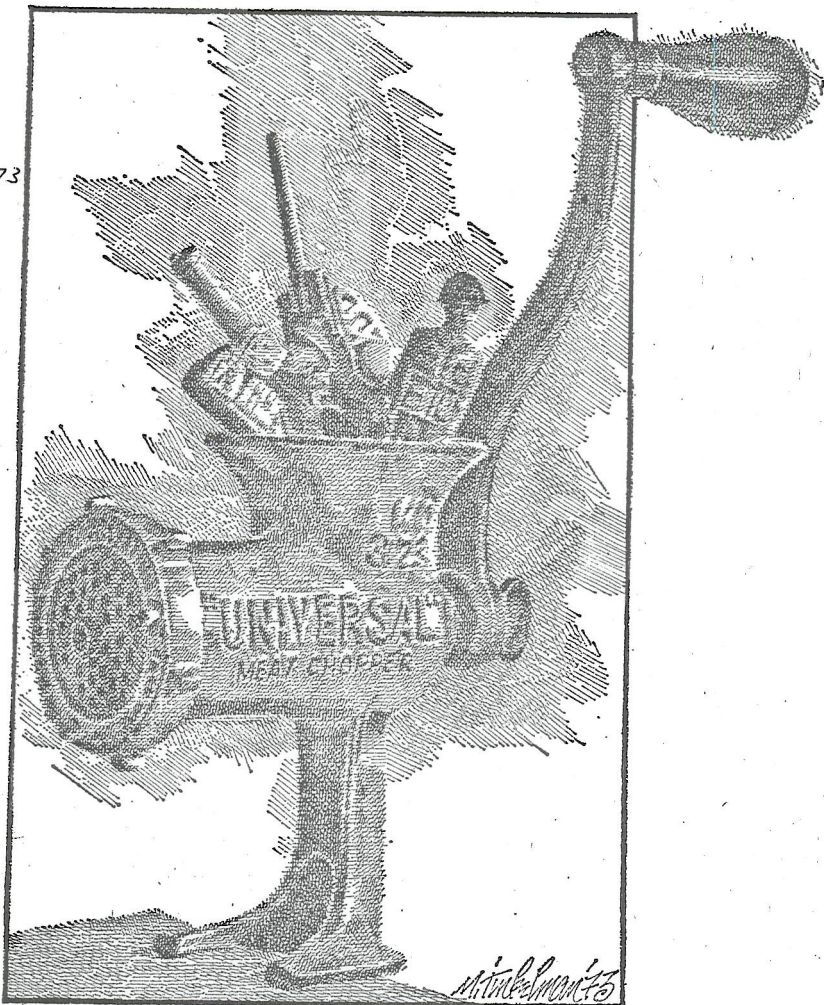
The most important question was not: Was this alert necessary? As vital as the answer to that question was during these times of distrust of our President, the more pressing question was: What would have happened if the Soviet Union had challenged the American military machine?

The best evidence indicates that in anything short of a nuclear exchange, the American forces would have been severely, if not fatally, mauled. An investigation of the American military machine after Vietnam produces evidence adding up to a harsh indictment: the nation's armed forces dominate society without protecting it. The defense establishment is not capable of defending the United States' true vital interests in the face of an enemy attack.

Many military men, mostly of the younger generation, support this indictment in their contemplative moments. Even Henry A. Kissinger privately tells friends he thinks the military cannot fight.

Here, service by service, is the situation:

- The Air Force is hobbled by a doctrine of "sanctuary basing" for its bombers and fighters—aircraft so sophisticated they can only be maintained under conditions approaching



the cleanliness, order and calm of a Swiss watch factory. It is for this reason that most of the Air Force's efforts in Southeast Asia were conducted from bases in Thailand and Guam, which were untouchable by the enemy. To gain relatively minor tactical advantages in a variety of conditions against an enemy, the Air Force, over the years, built even more complex machines. It takes an inventory of 70,000 spare parts, for example, to keep a wing of F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers operational in wartime conditions. Such an inventory can only be managed by a computer. Computers do not operate well under the dirty and jarring conditions of a battlefield. And there would be no escaping such conditions in Europe where the Soviet Union would not permit our Air Force to use sanctuaries.

The Air Force's newest airplanes, such as the F-111 at \$15 million apiece, are so expensive and sophisticated that Air Force commanders are actually afraid to fly them for fear of losing one. As a result, training has been cut to a bare minimum for pilots and ground crews alike.

● The Navy, excluding the strategic missile submarine force, has similar problems. The surface fleet is built around aircraft carriers that are, in effect, floating sanctuaries. If one of those carriers should be brought under attack, say in the Mediterranean, it would have to forego all offensive operations and spend 100 per cent of its efforts defending itself against enemy planes, submarines and missile-firing surface ships.

President Nixon has called the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean the most powerful fighting force ever assembled. That may be true in numbers. But a significant number of naval strategists believe the only tactic the carrier task forces of the fleet could adopt under attack would be a skedaddle through the Strait of Gibraltar.

Maybe that is why the Navy did not augment its force in the Mediterranean the week after the alert but announced instead that it had sent a carrier task force into the Indian Ocean where it did not face much real danger.

● The Army is the most seriously disabled of the services. It is an open secret throughout the defense establishment that its 180,000 troops in Europe would not even be able to cover their retreat to coastal ports or

to airfields of embarkation if Warsaw Pact forces came across what used to be known as the Iron Curtain. Our Army in Europe is a political hostage, not a fighting force. Units that train together fight well together but for the past decade, at least, Army units have not had the luxury of such togetherness. Thus they have not had the opportunity for intense training. This is true not only in Europe and Korea but at home as well. One division of 15,000 men, for example, recorded 50,000 job changes in one year in 1968. In the nineteen-seventies, the record has not been much better. Commanders, bent on furthering their own careers, move with revolving-door speed from one job to another and, as a result, few in the Army remain in positions of authority long enough to accomplish the basic mission of the service—to train and prepare troops for combat.

● The Marines have one division stationed overseas—on the island of Okinawa. When I visited that unit almost two years ago, it was so busy protecting the huge American military establishment against the native Ryukyuans who did not want it there that it had little time for training. It was hardly a combat-ready force.

The manner in which the armed forces came to this sorry state is complicated. It has its roots in the fact that after World War II, the professional officer corps adopted the corporate ethic and the corporate life-style in all its excesses. Duty-honor-country was replaced among the officers by a new trinity: Me-myself-and-I. Troop commanders and supervisors, bent on their own comforts and advancement, became suburban commuters who treated their men like suburbanites and the benighted of the inner city with a mixture of neglect and contempt. As a result, they allowed manpower, their most valuable resource, to sink into a state of demoralization and, in some locales, such as Korea, depravity.

In an attempt to rationalize decisions that were utterly irrational, they institutionalized not only deception of the public and their civilian superiors but of themselves, wreaking havoc with the system of command and control.

There are those within the military machine today who understand all this and who recognize the need for

deep reform. But whether they can get a hearing for their ideas is another matter. Congress would do well to seek out these young men in uniform. If the lawmakers can ever get beyond the preoccupation with the Watergate web, they could do no better than investigate the defense establishment from top to bottom, from the workings in the innermost sanctums of the Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting rooms to the depravity and corruption of the tiny bases in forgotten Korea; from the flag bridges of the aircraft carriers to the cockpits of the multimillion-dollar fighter bombers pilots are afraid to fly; from the classrooms of the military academies to the offices that administer the retirement pay programs that bloat the defense budget out of all proportion to what it provides.

Our conventional forces are an expensive, empty eggshell of a shield which provide little protection at all from the threat of another superpower.

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