

# Mr. Clinton's Army

By MARK HELPRIN

Many people have come to believe that thinking about war is akin to fomenting it, preparing for it is as unjustifiable as starting it, and fighting it is only unnecessarily prolonging it. History suggests that as a consequence of these beliefs they will bear heavy responsibility for the defeat of American arms on a battlefield and in a theater of war as yet unknown. Theirs are the kind of illusions that lead to a nation recoiling in shock and frustration, to the terrible depression of its spirits, the gratuitous encouragement of its enemies, and the violent deaths of thousands or tens of thousands, or more, of those who not long before were its children.

They will bear this responsibility along with contemporaries who are so enamored of the particulars of their well-being that they have made the government a kindly nurse of households, a concierge and cook, never mind a resurgent Saddam Hussein or China's rapid development of nuclear weapons. They will bear it along with the partisans of feminist and homosexual groups who see the military as a tool for social transformation. And they will bear it with a generation of politicians who have been guilty of willful neglect merely for the sake of office.

## Abject Lie

So many fatuous toadies have been put in place in the military that they will undoubtedly pop up like toast to defend Vice President Gore's statement that "if our servicemen and -women should be called on to risk their lives for the sake of our freedoms and ideals, they will do so with the best training and technology the world's richest country can put at their service." This is an abject lie.

To throw light on the vice president's assertion that all is well, consider that in Kosovo 37,000 aerial sorties were required to destroy what Gen. Wesley Clark claimed were 93 tanks, 53 armored fighting vehicles, and 389 artillery pieces; that these comprised, respectively, 8%, 7%, and 4% of such targets, leaving the Yugoslav army virtually intact; and that impeccable sources in the Pentagon state that Yugoslav use of decoys put the actual number of destroyed tanks, for example, in the single digits.

To achieve with several hundred sorties of \$50-million airplanes the singular splendor of destroying a Yugo, the United States went without carriers in the Western Pacific during a crisis in Korea, and the Air Force tasked 40% of its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, and 95% of its regular and 65% of its airborne tanker force, in what the chief of staff called a heavier strain than either the Gulf War or Vietnam.

One reason for the "inefficiency" of Operation Allied Force is that this very kind of farce is funded by cannibalizing operations and maintenance accounts. Such a thing would not by itself be enough to depress the services as they are now depressed. That has taken eight years of magnificent neglect. Case in point: The U.S. Navy now focuses on action in the littorals, and must deal with a burgeoning inventory of increasingly capable Third World coastal submarines that find refuge in marine layers and take comfort from the Navy's near century of inapplicable blue-water antisubmarine warfare. But our budget for surface-ship torpedo defense will shortly dip from not even \$5 million, to nothing in 2001.

The reduction of the military budget to two-thirds of what it was (in constant dollars) in 1985, and almost as great a cut in force levels, combined with systematic demoralization, scores of "operations other than war," and the synergistic breakdown that so often accompanies empires in decline and bodies wracked by disease, have produced a tidal wave of anecdotes and statistics. Twenty percent of carrier-deployed F-14s do not fly, serving as a source of spare parts instead. Forty percent of Army helicopters are rated insufficient to their tasks. Half of the Army's gas masks do not work. Due to reduced flying time and training opportunities within just a few years of Bill Clinton's first inauguration, 84% of F-15 pilots had to be waived through 38 categories of flight training. The pilot of the Osprey in the December

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1999 crash that killed 19 Marines had only 80 hours in the aircraft, and the pilot who sliced the cables of the Italian aerial tram in 1998, killing 20, had not flown a low-altitude training flight for seven months. It goes on and on, and as the sorry state of the military becomes known, the administration responds by doing what it does best.

In the manner of Gen. Clark presenting as a success the—exaggerated—claim of having destroyed 8% of the Yugoslav tank forces in 78 days of bombing, the administration moved to "restructure" the six armored and mechanized divisions by shrinking force levels 15% and armor 22%, while expanding the divisional battle sector by 250%, the idea being that by removing 3,000 men and 115 tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles while vastly expanding the area in which it would have to fight, a division would somehow be made more effective.

The two failed Army divisions cited by George W. Bush in his acceptance speech were returned to readiness with speed inversely proportional to the time it takes the White House to produce a subpoenaed document, perhaps because, according to the Army, "new planning considerations have enabled division commanders to make a more accurate assessment," and "the timelines for deployment . . . have been adjusted to better enable them to meet contingency requirements." In 1995, brigade officials told the General Accounting Office that they felt pressured to falsify readiness ratings, and that the rubric "needs practice" was applied irrespective of whether a unit scored 99% or 1% of the minimum passing grade.

But there is more. Mainly by coincidence but partly by design, several broader measures exist. The Army rates its echelons. In 1994, two-thirds of these were judged fully ready for war. By 1999, not one of them was. More than half the Army's specialty schools have received the lowest ratings, as did more than half its combat training centers (although the chaplains are doing very well). These

training centers serve as an instrument that illuminates the character of all the units that pass through them. By examining their ratings it is possible to get a comprehensive view of the Army's true state.

I have obtained National Training Center trend data that are the careful measure of unit performance in 60 areas over three years. Of 200 evaluations, only two were satisfactory. This 99% negative performance, stunning as it is, is echoed in the preliminary findings of a RAND study that, according to sources within the Army, more than 90% of the time rates mission capability at the battalion and the brigade levels as insufficient. RAND has voluminous data and doesn't want to talk about it until all the t's are crossed, long after the election.

If Gov. Bush becomes president, the armies his father sent to the Gulf will not be available to him, not after eight years of degradation at the hands of Bill Clinton. Given that their parlous condition is an invitation to enemies of the United States and, therefore, Mr. Bush might need them, and because the years of the locust are always paid for in blood, he should take this issue and with it hammer upon the doors of the White House at dawn.

In the Second World War, Marine Brig. Gen. Robert L. Denig said, with homely elegance, "This is a people's war. The people want to know, need to know, and have a right to know, what is going on." Nothing could be truer, and the vice president of the United States does not speak the truth when he characterizes as he does those forces that for two terms his administrations have mercilessly run down. The American military does not deserve this. It is not a cash cow for balancing the budget, a butler-and-travel service for the president, an instrument of sexual equality, or a gendarmerie on the model of a French Foreign Legion with a broader mandate and worse food.

## Caesar's Legions

If we are, in effect, the enemies of our own fighting men, what will happen when they go into the field? The military must be redeemed. Should Gov. Bush win in November he should bring forward and promote soldiers and civilians who understand military essentials and the absolute necessity of readiness and training, people both colorful and drab, but who would, all of them, understand that these words of Gen. George S. Patton are the order of the day:

"In a former geological era when I was a boy studying latin, I had occasion to translate one of Caesar's remarks which as nearly as I can remember read something like this:

"In the winter time, Caesar so trained his legions in all that became soldiers and so habituated them in the proper performance of their duties, that when in the spring he committed them to battle against the Gauls, it was not necessary to give them orders, for they knew what to do and how to do it."

"This quotation expresses very exactly the goal we are seeking in this division. I know that we shall attain it and when we do, May God have mercy on our enemies; they will need it."

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