

View From The Sidelines

The preparation of this paper has been delayed about twelve years. It comes about now only because one member of the society suggested it is time to hear from a military man on military matters.

Twelve years ago, when I first became a member of the Athenaeum Society I was newly arrived in Hopkinsville after a 33 year absence. All of those years were spent in the uniform of the U. S. Army and the U. S. Air Force.

As a new member I didn't write on military subjects because of a vague feeling that I was too close to the forest to see the trees. A second, and even more compelling reason was the forthright admonition from my life long friend, the late Jack Henard, that the delivery of an Athenaeum paper on matters directly involving the author's own profession would be considered unfair, cowardly, and inexcusable and that he for one would not put up with it.

I admit that I was cowed by Jack's silver, but forked tongue. The result I fell in line with the established practice of the society, which is to prepare papers on subjects about which the author possesses abysmal ignorance----- not only before the paper, but afterwards as well.

Now, parenthetically let me offer a disclaimer, lest someone be offended: By no means do I wish to imply that all

papers conforming to the standard practice are to be scorned.

On the contrary some of them, unforgettable papers, have re-

flected such exhaustive research, and have imprinted upon

our minds such valuable insights that they might well have

altered the course of some of our lives: For example, it

was the night I gave my first Athenæum paper. I was the

first presenter. For the life of me I can't remember the

title or the content of my paper, and I venture to say that

not one of you present would remember it either. Then the

second speaker was called. I am supremely confident that

not one has forgotten the title or the content of one of

the most learned, stunning, informative and convincing

papers in Athenæum history on "STEAM PRESSURE VESSELS."

Now I have forgotten who gave that paper.

Having declared that I waited twelve years to write

this paper, I anticipate that during the rebuttal, someone

will rise to suggest I well could have waited another twelve

years. Whomever you may be, in advance I give you permission

to go back to sleep now, and I will request the Secretary

to awaken you at the break.

Always, old military men are tempted to lapse into

nostalgia, and I am no exception. After many years as a

military aviator, three wars (or was it one war and two

half-wars), the shattering experience of being a Pentagon

staff officer, and a taste of diplomatic duty, there are

some lofty memories dashing through my head.

Most of the memories that float to the top involve flying and airplanes and wars. Becoming a military pilot was a fulfilled childhood ambition. Ernest Hemingway once wrote of military pilots and their planes:

"You love a lot of things if you live around them.

"But there isn't any woman and there isn't any horse, not any before nor any after, that is as lovely as a great airplane. And men who love them are faithful to them even though they leave them for others. Man has one virginity to lose in fighters, and if it is a lovely airplane, he loses to it, there is where his heart will forever be."

And that is the way I felt, and still feel, toward many of the aircraft I flew.

The wars, and the aerial adventures and escapades involved in wars bring memories that are sometimes tragic--- but mostly good. When I try hard enough to circumvent the selective memory process and recall it like it really was, I realize that what I, like most others, really experienced was weeks and months of boredom and discomfort along with short periods of elation punctuated by moments of stark terror.

You will be spared the details and the embellishments that old soldiers and airmen are entitled to; those I save for the tender and credulous ears of my grandchildren, whose

rebuttals are gentle always.

Looking backward, there is nothing really remarkable or noteworthy in my military career, certainly nothing that the historians in this Society would trouble to record.

As someone once said, a good part of life is spent just showing up. And that's the way I made it through my 33 year vacation from Hopkinsville.

That is enough of the trip down memory lane. The remainder of this paper will focus on the military establishment I once knew and my own perception of---and commentary on---what is happening now.

When I was commissioned in 1938 the total strength of the U.S Army Air Corps was less than 12,000 officers and men. There were many vintage airplanes of all types but only about forty modern bombers (early model B-17's) and maybe one hundred P-35's and P-36's, the first production model low wing, all metal fighters. The first fighter I ever flew, <sup>was</sup> an open cockpit ~~was~~ a P-12 B, a 1920's model wood and fabric bi-plane that didn't even have brakes.

By 1939 events in Europe made it plain to our military leaders and some of our political leaders what lay ahead.

At the close of 1939 we had about 50,000 personnel on active duty. The Army Air Corps started 1940 with about 1700 aircraft and before the year ended accepted more than 5,000 new aircraft from the factories,---a production miracle.

Expansion of the Navy and the Army ground forces were proceeding at almost the same pace.

During the fight against Germany the AAF peaked at 13,000 combat planes, supported by more than 600,000 men. We destroyed more than 30,000 German aircraft and lost to them about 18,000.

In the Pacific the Air Forces almost obliterated sixty industrial cities before A-bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The ultimate in air attack had been reached when the Japanese lost their will to fight, and surrendered without a ground invasion of their country.

Army Air Force personnel strength peaked at 2,400,000<sup>in Jan 1945</sup> and aircraft strength at 80,000. It was the world's greatest air force and our ground and naval forces were no less formidable. More importantly the nation was united. It was great to be a part of the effort. There was almost nothing we couldn't accomplish---in war or peace.

Less than two years after the end of the World War II the Army Air Force strength had dipped to about 300,000 men and combat capability had sunk to the depths.

On September 18, 1947 the AAF became the United States Air Force, and the new service got busy organizing itself.

Most of the effort seemed to go to R & D. Capt. <sup>Chuck</sup> Church

Yeager flew the X-1 through the sound barrier, new jet aircraft were developed, tested and put into operation. Lead-

ership in the Air Force, <sup>and all our military services</sup> was good.

Then, on the morning of June 25, 1950 the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea. We had ourselves a war again. The Air Force National Guard and Reserves were called up, old World War II airplanes were taken out of moth balls, and in almost no time the old World War II pros had things under control, at least in the air.

But this time the situation was different. Our political leaders got butterflies in their stomachs and for the first time in the history of our country we were not allowed to win. We were barely allowed to tie. The impact on the regular military establishment was severe.

The healing process that accompanies the passage of time was not yet complete when we plunged into the Vietnam morass. This was the first war--or police action--or armed conflict--or whatever one wishes to label it, in which micro-management was practiced. Micro-management means detailed management and direction, down to one man with a rifle or one pilot in an airplane by the people in the Pentagon or in the White House. As you know, we were managed to the first loss in our nation's history. It was a devastating loss of a cruel five year war that we should never have entered. But once in, any objective professional will testify the war should and could have been won in a few months at a fraction of the loss in men and material. Our armed forces and our national psyche have

never recovered.

Strong military leaders cannot function under the rules of political indecision and micro-management imposed on our military forces during and since the Vietnam fiasco. And very few strong leaders have emerged.

In the fateful year of 1940 President Franklin Roosevelt and Secretary of War Henry Stimson began to get a clear picture of a muddled situation in American preparedness and the challenges that lay ahead. The President assigned military planning and implementing tasks to a few farsighted, courageous, and decisive people in the right place at the right time, gave them the resources they needed, and they proceeded to sort out the confusion and take the steps leading to victory in W.W.II. Among these men were General George C. Marshall, Admiral Ernest King, and General H. H. (Hap.) Arnold.

In today's political/military climate I doubt if any one of those great men could become a general. They could never be steered by bureaucratic group pressure or popular opinion, nor would they be able to put together a politically acceptable budget package.

More than 30 years ago I was a student at the Naval War College. I clearly remember hearing the stories of Admiral Yarnell, who reached the statutory retirement age back in 1939 and thus had to give up command of the United States Asiatic Fleet. Admiral Yarnell had attracted national atten-

tion because of his performance in facing down the ever more aggressive Japanese along the China coast. He had been given, according to the record, the most sweeping authority to act as he saw fit. Harry Yarnell, in those months before Pearl Harbor made any kind of diplomacy redundant for a spell; he was clearly a more important instrument of US policy than our ambassadors to China and Japan.

Now that was a while ago. No admiral or general these days is given sweeping authority to do anything. With computers, instant communications, and layer upon layer of managers, crises are managed from Washington rather than on the spot. Scientific management is well on its way toward replacing that old and mysterious skill known as judgement, which led in turn to something called command decisions.

Recently we saw <sup>the</sup> epitome of the eye-on-the-sparrow approach in the aborted and humiliating mission to rescue the hostages in Iran. All of the planning and direction of the mission took place in Washington, much of it in the White House itself. We are familiar with the tragic results. What many might not have noticed were the findings of a board of senior active duty and retired generals and admirals <sup>and</sup> picked by the President and the Secretary of Defense, to investigate the failed mission. In brief, the Board found that the concept and the planning done in Washington was perfect, but alluded to some failures at lower levels,



and implied that bad luck was the real cause of the tragic failure.

Now it can't be denied that in a complex military operation no amount of planning can eliminate bad luck entirely. I would make the observation that there certainly was bad luck. However, it has been my experience that bad luck is a close companion of poor planning and, conversely, good planning and good luck are good bedfellows. From what we read of this mission regarding the number of agencies in the act, the command structure, confusion of authority on the scene at Desert 1; aircraft maintenance, people getting lost, aircraft accidents, poor weather forecasting, insufficient resources, etc. we might conclude that bad luck was predictable. I can assure you that bad luck was never an acceptable excuse for failure in the Air Force that I knew. Even now I am convinced the U S Air Force could have carried out the airborne portion of the mission, given the job and the authority.

More disturbing was the sly attempt from some quarters to pin the trouble on an easy mark. The military, we are told, has once again failed the Commander-in-Chief. But even good and dedicated men, and there's no doubt that these men were, cannot perform a mission without the proper support and commitment from the top. It would have taken fantastic good luck for the mission to have succeeded.

Desert 1 does not matter anymore, of course. It is

finished, the whole scheme blown higher than the Washington

Monument. What does matter are the tests that lie ahead.

Whoever is President in the years just down the road is going

to be faced with some tough decisions. Unless he has faith

in his military, and more importantly, reason for that faith,

his options are going to be severely limited.

So long as the crises are small the eye-on-the-sparrow

approach will probably serve. It may even be a logical way

to operate in a world where we are apparently afraid of our

enemies and unsure of our friends. If that is, there is

any logic in a great power having that attitude.

However, logical or not, this centralization of authority

is doing bad things to the profession of arms. That, along

with the seemingly calculated assault on the quality of military

life, is leading to disenchantment among our career people.

There is discontent in the senior ranks because getting there

is too often proving to be a disappointment. Both respon-

sibilities and privileges have been eroded away. The serious

thing about unhappiness in the senior ranks is that it filters

down.

All of the services are suffering from a lack of senior

noncommissioned officers, as well as a steady departure of

some of the best qualified junior officers.

Pay is a reason. Military pay has nowhere near kept up

with inflation or with pay in the civilian sector. Today, in

the Air Force, one third of the enlisted men works for less

than the minimum wage. These men guard our alert aircraft and perform work on sophisticated weapons systems around the clock in all kinds of weather, and they make less than garbage men and dishwashers. Highly trained enlisted men and officers are leaving the military service simply because they can't afford to stay. I'm not talking about fortunes--I am talking about putting meals on the table--of being able to clothe, feed and educate their children. They are leaving because they can't support their families, even though many of them love their profession and would prefer to stay. And it helps none at all when their commander-in-chief petulantly rebukes the Secretary of Defense, who had suggested a pay raise last year, by publicly declaring, "When I was in the Navy money was not the dominant concern."

Many service families qualify for welfare assistance in the form of rent subsidies or food stamps. Each year military commissaries cash \$10,000,000 in food stamps. I often see food stamps in the military commissaries, although not nearly as many as would be seen should all those military families who qualify use them. Many are far too proud; using food stamps and wearing a uniform just don't seem to fit together.

Another reason for the loss of many of our best men is much more difficult to grasp, yet by far the greatest issue-- they are leaving because of the feeling, real or perceived, that their stature in American society is negatively affected

by their wearing the uniform of their country. When you ask a man (or woman) 25 or 26 years old to make a lifetime commitment he needs a faith that such a commitment will be rewarded by at least equal commitment from his country. Does America really care? The answer is terribly important, and at this point the answer is not clear.

By any measure our military forces are inferior to those of a threatening Soviet <sup>Union</sup> China. Although numbers alone can't tell the whole story they nevertheless are meaningful.

Consider a few numbers:

The Soviets have 975 modern strategic and tactical bombers. The U.S. has 382; many of them more than 20 years old.

The Soviets have 1400 intercontinental missiles. We have 1054.

The Soviets have 10,000 strategic defense missiles. The U.S. has zero.

The Soviets have 7,200 aerospace defensive radar systems. The U.S. has 134.

The Soviets maintain 175 combat divisions. The U.S. 19.

The Soviet Navy is now three times the size of ours in numbers of ships.

Worse, the trend is all wrong for us. While the Russians are pursuing a trend of increasing capabilities, our strength is declining, or hopefully leveling off.

This is not a matter that can be shrugged off with the

rationalization that we will be ready when and if the time comes. The time is now, or was it yesterday? Look what has happened already in Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, Cuba, Panama, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nicaragua, San Salvador, Iran, Afghanistan, to name a few. Our adversaries are very much aware that militarily, and therefore politically, we are powerless; they show few signs of being deterred by posutr<sup>ing</sup>, withdrawing from grain markets, and snubbing Olympic games.

Dr. Henry Kissinger made an observation in his book, "The White House Years", that deserves some reflection. "Throughout history the political influence of nations has been roughly correlative to their military power----- in the final reckoning, weakness has invariably tempted aggression and impotence brings abdication of policy in its train." It seems obvious enough when we read it. How then did we come to disregard so plain a truth?

Cassandras have never been popular, beginning with the original from Greek mythology, who was murdered. The long years of Soviet climb toward military preeminence has seen the doomsayers effectively countered and rebuffed by an articulate and seemingly rational body of opinion. Our strength lies in our economy and in "social justice", not in wasteful military forces, goes one argument. The fact that our economy relies on such things as imported oil, manganese, chrome, and titanium, any or all of which might be denied us by military force, is rarely mentioned.

In this paper I have taken some pot shots, all richly deserved, at our current military and political leaders.

But could there be something more fundamental, a root cause, for the dismal picture? One flinches at the possibility that the quality of our political leadership and the status of our military forces truly reflects us, the electorate.

Let us take a look, from 10,000 miles away, through the eyes of a foreigner. Mark Tier, an Australian economist, who writes about the American Empire that was born in 1776, peaked in 1945 and remained dominant in the world until the Vietnam War. He thinks that American Empire is now in a long term decline.

An empire may last for 10 or 1,000 years but eventually it falls apart. It never declines because of a threat from outside; it always declines from weakness within. For example, Rome was sacked by Germanic tribes, but those tribes had been held at Rome's borders for centuries before. Rome was too weak or too unwilling to defend itself, and the weakness can be traced to an over-blown bureaucracy, high taxes, too much regulation and debasement of the currency. The citizens of Rome had lost their desire to defend it since their government had become their enemy, not their friend. Mr. Tier thinks the American Empire is declining for approximately the same reasons.

It is not pre-ordained that empires must always collapse; it is simply the lesson of history that they always have.

General Douglas McArthur said: "History fails to record a single precedent in which nations subject to moral decay have not passed into political and economic decline. There has been either a spiritual awakening to overcome the moral lapse, or a progressive deterioration leading to ultimate national disaster."

It seems that in a prophetic way General McArthur understood the real issues.

If the rhetoric from the candidates in the current national political campaign means anything at all, our government is on the brink of throwing a lot of money at our armed forces. And that is good, late though it may be. We need money badly to equip our forces and pay our men. But money is only part of the answer.

With money, any modern country outside our borders can build airplanes, missiles, or smart bombs, but not one can build Americans.

How do we propose to do that??