Innovation, Status Quo, or Relative Regression?

The peacetime military
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Dr. Don Snider claims that as militaries downsize in the future, they will likely become increasingly bureaucratic, and "bureaucratization is the antithesis of the profession."[1] He discusses this issue because the military is on the cusp of an interwar period, and the institution will have the tendency to make decisions, such as bureaucratization, that actually cause harm to the organization. Military leaders need to be prepared to make tough decisions to prevent reclusion of the force rather than accelerate it. The future may be uncertain, but the interwar period between World War I and World War II created different challenges. Arguably, the three most significant obstacles confronting military organizations during the interwar years were public policy, budgetary constraints, and inability to properly prepare for war. These are the most significant because they place considerable restrictions on military innovation, preventing effective preparation for national defense and the military's ability to fight and win the Nation's wars.

The first obstacle was that interwar public policy prevented military progression because allocating significant defense resources seemed needless in the face of perceived global peace. During the interwar period, many politicians and their constituents adopted and fiercely enforced isolationism as policy due to the absence of existential threats.[2] This policy is logical but shortsighted. As history perpetually demonstrates, national security threats continue to arise even during prosperous eras. Policy makers need to balance short-term requirements with long-term goals. Use a family budget as a simple analogy. Families need to plan for both short-term (daily expenses) with long-term spending (lifetime longevity). A short-term family crisis or prosperous period may affect longevity planning, but a family that ends long-term financial planning may suffer doom in the future. Since this public policy focused on the present rather than balancing

Budget constraints also impact force readiness and can't be ignored during budget tightening periods. (Photo by LCpl Dorian L. Utsinger.)

the present with the future, political leaders left militaries with few options to prepare for potential conflicts.

Militaries learned few operational and tactical lessons during World War I leading to public distrust and ultimately limited military innovation.[3] Political leaders essentially practiced the opposite of mission command. It seemed like World War I events gave politicians little reason to trust the military. Democratic nations seemed to be hit the hardest because the vast majority of citizens did not realize benefits that theoretically emerge after winning large-scale total war.[4] The events around World War I created the perfect storm of political distrust and isolationism, resulting in public policy handicapping militaries' ability to prepare for future battle.

The second interwar obstacle was fiscal policy. Funding cutbacks commonly led to drastic defense spending reductions. Superficially, this sounds similar to the first obstacle, but it is not. The first obstacle relates to public policy, especially with the view of isolationism. This obstacle relates directly to funding. Research and development funding waned, resulting in obsolete and mechanically unreliable tanks as well as immature mechanized doctrine at the onset of World War II.[5] This is a solid prelude to the infamous quote by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the onset of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, "you go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want."[6] Both situations conclude with sending unprepared service members to war.

Fiscal constraints provided an easy excuse for military leaders to practice lazy strategies and focus all efforts into a single method or process, such as the Royal Navy's antisubmarine device.[7] It became easy for military leaders to avoid innovative ideas because they could not afford to do as desired. As Ori Brafman stated, "no one ever gets fired for not innovating."[8] Innovative leaders find ways around fiscal constraints, but since most training events require some degree of money, leaders avoided activity that spent money, even the when decisions defied logic. For example, UK leaders

We have to prepare for the next war, not train for the last one. (Photo by Cpl Sarah Anderson.)

focused great effort to substitute unlike units, such as air power for land power in an attempt to raise a cheaper military force without loss of capability. The obvious problem is that the military lost symbiotic forces, and the policy would prove ineffective.[9] By the end of the interwar period, funding limitation took its toll on the military, and the allied powers entered World War II largely undertrained and underequipped.

The first two listed obstacles manifested a third: military organizations lacked resources to properly prepare for war through realistic training. Even though intellectual decentralization allowed many leaders to theorize about doctrine and develop military improvements, they were unable to test these theories to refine military doctrine and prepare for the next war.[10] A present day military staple is combat training centers. Even eastern European militaries presently understand the utility of training centers, and many have either established one or are working to establish one.[11] Even in the face of constrained resources present militaries are capable of practicing innovation. Interwar militaries were not as fortunate. Without the ability to test military theory in the field, leaders simply guessed or even gambled that their methods would work.

As part of the third obstacle, many countries trained for the enemy they wanted to fight rather than the enemy they would likely fight. For some nations, training devolved into merely a ceremonial demonstration rather than combat preparation.[12] Numerous examples of early World War II battles support this claim where the undertrained allied powers often lost to the tough and realistic German training. One example is the British defeat in North Africa. Due to decentralization, British military leaders were unable to fight and win with large organizations, and the German military easily defeated the British forces.[13]

During the interwar period between World War I and World War II, the three most significant obstacles confronting military organizations were public policy, fiscal constraints, and lack of preparation for future war. Peacetime periods potentially place significant restrictions and stifle innovation in military organizations. As mentioned earlier, current militaries will likely centralize unlike the decentralization of interwar militaries. Large, centralized military units on large bases have cost saving and resource pooling potential. In resource-constrained environments, units can depend on support from other units, unlike the interwar period. How-

Training and exercises can be impacted by policy and budget constraints. (Photo by LCpl Austin M. Livingston.)

ever, bureaucratic units will likely stifle innovative ideas before testing the ideas. The result is a military exercising status quo rather than innovating for the next fight. The challenge that militaries must overcome is the gravitation toward status quo.

LTG Edward Cardon stated that "major is the toughest rank [in the Army] because you are committed to the Army, but you don't know if the Army is invested in you."[14] Majors, like peacetime militaries, seek survival; they want to prove their strengths to remain relevant. This problem sets conditions for good units and leaders to make bad decisions in the name of surviving in the military. For example, three years ago, many leaders did not necessarily demonstrate great concern for their evaluations. The result is a cohesive group of majors working to the betterment of the unit less than the individual's. Presently, strong evaluations have become the most important tool regarding promotion potential. The result is at least a subtle, maybe even overt competitive environment, which degrades command climates and tears apart teams. The challenge becomes to develop innovative methods to thwart negatively competitive undercurrents so units, rather than individuals, worry about performance.

Creative thinkers must develop methods to innovate during these austere periods. Less funding actually presents opportunities for greater creativity because leaders have more time to develop methods to operate with constrained resources. Current military downsizing is inevitable, but progressive thinkers mitigate risks associated with constrained resources. Like the interwar period, the challenge currently in front of the military is how to innovate and overcome obstacles such as public policy, budgetary constraints, and diminished war preparations. Some previously encountered obstacles may not repeat themselves, but new ones will arrive, and innovative leaders, soldiers, and units will bear the burden to move into the future without regressing to the past.

Notes

1. Dr. Don Snider, "Military Professions, their Professionals, and their Ethic," (lecture, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 21 August 2014).

2. U.S. Department of State, "American Isolationism in the 1930s," Office of the Historian, accessed on 15 December 2014 at https://history.state.gov/milestones.

3. Williamson Murray, "Armored Warfare," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, edited by Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30, iBooks.

4. Ibid.

5. Alexander M. Bielakowski, "Mechanization in the Interwar U.S. Cavalry," U.S. Army Cavalry Officers and the Issue of Mechanization, 1916–1940, (doctorate dissertation, Kansas State University, 2002).

6. Donald Rumsfeld, "Rumsfeld: You Go to War with the Army You Have," (video of MSNBC coverage of a 2004 town hall meeting with deployed service members, Camp Buehring, Kuwait), accessed 18 January 2015 at https://www.youtube.com.

7. Holger H. Herwig, "Innovation Ignored: The Submarine Problem—Germany, Britain, and the United States, 1919–1939," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, 637.

8. Ori Brafman, "The Starfish and the Spider," (lecture, Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 21 January 2015).

9. Alan Stephens, "The True Believers: Airpower between the Wars," *The War in the Air: 1914–1994*, (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2001).

10. Christopher R. Gabel, "Innovative Thinking in the Interwar Army, 1920–1940," Department of Military History, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2014).

11. The author worked at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany from 2011–2014 and has first-hand experience with Romanian, Bulgarian, Macedonia, Croatian, and Baltic training centers or training center establishment.

12. Williamson Murray, "Armored Warfare: The British, French, and German Experiences," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, 67.

13. Ibid., 98.

14. LTG Edward C. Cardon, presentation regarding global cyber threats, (lecture, Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 3 December 2014).

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