

SOME THOUGHTS ON WAR

Reflections on US Army Field Manual 100-5, 1st July, 1976... 1976

Discussion of objectives

1. “We cannot know when or where the US Army will again be ordered into battle, but we must assume the enemy we face will possess weapons generally as effective as our own.” (p1-1). Unless the US Army has told their government that the only battle order they will accept is to do battle with the USSR then this is not a valid statement of the future they face. Because of Soviet developments it would be true to say that the US Army must be prepared to meet an enemy possessing weapons generally as effective as their own. Generally speaking they can expect to meet enemies possessing less effective weapons, usually much less effective.

This, the second opening sentence of the document, must have received serious consideration and could hardly be a faulty communication. The implications of what is written are, therefore, of some importance for what follows in the document.

If this assumption is dropped the US Army is to that extent free to prepare itself to meet a wide range of demands in an appropriate fashion. If it is not dropped the green light is thereby given to top priority investment in the most sophisticated Main Battle Force that the combined efforts of science and industry can produce. Investments to create alternative military capabilities will be seen as, at least, diversionary. It will be noted that this argument is very much like the early sixties argument between the US Army and the US Strategic Bombing Command: the former then arguing for flexibility of response and the latter for massive retaliation.

2. The document is based on a second assumption (actually a pair of assumptions) about the future conditions under which the US Army can expect to wage war:

“Because the lethality of modern weapons continues to increase sharply, we can expect very high losses to occur in short periods of time... Therefore, the first battle of our next war could well be its last battle: belligerents could be quickly exhausted, and international pressures to stop fighting could bring about an early cessation of hostilities.” (p1-1).

The sharp rate of increases in lethality, at every level of armed combat, is not to be denied. FM 100-5 documents this for the intermediate range of weapons systems e.g. tanks and artillery. The two assumptions are embodied in what is assumed to “therefore” follow. They could knock each other out in the first round, or at least one could knock the other out; international pressures could prevent the belligerents fighting out more than the first round. These assumptions are not independent. Mutual exhaustion after the first battle could make international pressure more effective, as in the Israeli-Arab war of 1973. However, this example is politically irrelevant. The USA and the USSR were the main suppliers for a new military build-up and also the main sources of international pressure for a non-military settlement. This situation would have no parallel if the USA and the USSR engaged in war. They supply themselves and no other nation is in a position to make the realistic threats that the USSR made during the Suez fight, and again after the OPEC oil-price hike.

The US Army cannot assume that the USA (or the USSR) will be unable to re-group and re-equip for many more battles after the first one. This would be true only if the first land battle was escalated to be a battle between their intercontinental nuclear missile systems. If such escalation was not assumed then the planners would have to work from their knowledge that neither nation's military resource bases, i.e. command structures, reserves and productive capabilities, had been in any way diminished by the outcome of the first battle. Indeed, loss of the first battle might well have a 'Pearl Harbour Effect', in creating a willingness, in the civil population and the politicians, to re-order national priorities mobilizing undreamt of resources.

FM 100-5 refers to the massive mobilization the USA demonstrated in WW 1 and WW2. It could not deny what is possible in event of a WW3. Why then is this tremendous capability treated as if it were irrelevant? I doubt that this can be traced to an ignorance of the capabilities of US industry. The Industrial War College is a standing feature in the education of the higher military ranks and industrial careers a fairly natural extension of their military careers.

It looks very much as if the military see a role for themselves in a first battle. After that the course of war is out of their hands. It could be that this first battle is followed by political negotiations, in the international arena, but in any case the US Army sees no point in preparing for a second or third battle. When Lind asked, at his briefing on this document, "What happens after the first battle?" he got the reply that, "It will all be like a Chinese fire fighting brigade".

Clearly the national strategy, as projected in FM 100-5, is based on the warfare capabilities existing at the time of the declaration of war. Clearly, they are also based on the existence of capabilities extending beyond those of the US Army: The ICBM capabilities of the US Submarine force & the USAAF.

Objectives

After this discussion of the relevant futures within which the US Army can expect to operate there is a clear statement of THE OBJECTIVE:

"Today the US Army, above all else, prepare to win the first battle of the next war... Battle in Central Europe against the Warsaw Pact could be assigned."
(pp1-1, 1-2)

This statement of mission is quite unambiguous about who, where and how. It does not specify when and presumably, the officer corps know why. FM 100-5 addresses itself to the question of what is needed to fulfill this mission. It assumes that the widespread availability of weapons that are not projected until the 1980's will be soon enough for the 'when'. It does not even raise the question of whether the officer corps will know why they should use these 'future weapons' when the 80's arrive. This, despite the fact that the majority of the officer corps do not think that this is the war they should be preparing themselves for ()

This is but a single objective: the US Army must win the first battle between themselves and the Soviets on the North German Plains.

It is unusual to have such an unambiguous statement of objective, or mission. It provides an unusually good grounds for inferring intentions.

First, note that the claim that "this is the most demanding mission the US Army could be assigned" is not true. There are not many uncertainties in that mission even

though the outcome is uncertain. I feel pretty sure that the order to invade Japan in 1945 was felt much more demanding. I am quite sure that an order to defeat China on Chinese territory would be seen by the US Army as many times more demanding. It is doubtful in fact that they would accept such an order as being within their capabilities. FM 100-5 seems to say just that*

It is fine for a Canadian military commentator to praise FM 100-5 for its commitment to a forward defence in Europe. An Asian military commentator might be more impressed by the apparent refusal to be involved in another Korea or Viet Nam.

Second, and of more direct importance to our nations about the conduct of war, is the concept that conditions are now such that the winner of a US-USSR war must “win the first battle”. There is nothing in the past history of warfare that justifies such a dogma. We are led to believe, in the discussion of “increasing lethality of battle”, that the 1973 Israel-Arab conflict establishes this as the new realistic dogma. This is quite unacceptable. The much quoted lethality was a set piece first battle. The second phase Israeli strike across the canal showed that armoured mobility was still the name of the game.

I think the answer is there, but not as perceived – the missile systems used by the Egyptians with such success in phase 1 needed to be as mobile, on battle field a road, as the armoured forces they were fighting. They were not, a hence played little part in phase II of that war.

I am suggesting that the rationale of this dogma does not come from a study of military history. Its roots are elsewhere.

The “first battle victory” is a concept more relevant to a pre-emptive first strike. A strike aimed at maximum gains before international pressures come to bear.

But his makes no sense.

Whether such a first strike were launched by either the USA or the USSR it is still they that would have to negotiate, not some ‘international community’. And they could negotiate only against the background of the next step into mutual nuclear destruction. That is the corner of the board & neither will wish to force the other into that position.

One can only wonder how the US national Security Council allowed their Army to formulate such a dogma.

It is one thing to formulate the primary mission as doing battle with the Warsaw Pact forces. It is another to declare that this will be done on the North German Plains. It is yet another thing to decide that this will have to be settled in the first battle.

‘Winning the first battle’ must be considered in the context of what it means for the US Army. It would mean:

- a) a very low priority to everything other than the equipment & training of the Main Battle Force in Europe.
- b) A determination to sacrifice if necessary the force ready for the first battle,
- c) The implicit philosophy of war

There are grounds for believing that the US Army have accepted delimitation of their role to that of being agent-provocateurs to a major conflict, and presumably

• Footnote. There is reason to believe that the Soviet Army have arrived at the same conclusion. The Japanese went about this business in the 1930’s and 40’s without success. They are not about to try again. This leaves China like a two-eyed grouping on a Wei-chi board.

garbage collectors & policemen in the aftermath of the intervening nuclear holocaust.

Let us, however, consider FM 100-5 in its purported army context.

An alternative to the objective of winning the first battle is illustrated by the German-Russian war 1941-5. The Russians lost the first battle, the battle of the frontier, they lost spectacularly, but they gained:

- a) sufficient respite to regroup their war industries and draw up their reserve armies.
- b) Combat experience of the new mechanized battlefield.

Of course they had the space within which to lose but still retain the freedom to re-group & mobilize. However, there is ample space between the Oder & Gibraltar for more than one battle, let alone in the space between the Oder & San Francisco.

It may be politically unacceptable to the West Germans but geographically it is possible to lose the first battle and still win the war.

Part of the difficulty in confronting this alternative may arise from the manual's emphasis on the Clausewitzian dictum that,

“The army’s primary objective is to win the land battle – to fight and win in battles, large or small .. to win the first battle... emerging triumphant from the second, third and final battles as well “ (1-1)

Actually winning land battles is not the primary objective of an army. An army’s objectives must be subordinate to and derived from the primary objective of the armed forces of the state. The primary objective of the armed forces is to cow the enemy or to deter him i.e. to modify the will of the enemy. It may be necessary to engage in and win battles to produce this modification of the enemy’s will. It may, however, be enough to engage in battle and attrite the enemy’s resources; it may even be that by appearing to be able to do either of these things the same result is achieved (e.g the Nazi re-occupation of the Rhineland & the occupation of Austria, Italy, Hungary & Czechoslovakia & the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States).

What is overlooked by the Clausewitzian dictum is that while winning a battle necessarily produces localized effects on the enemy’s exercise of his will, it does not necessarily follow that the effects spread to the enemy’s broader perception of his national interests.

How then could the primary objective of the US Army be formulated?

Several features stand out as necessary.

First, the objective must specify capabilities as seen by the potential enemies, not actualities like seeking out and winning battles nor just objectively determined capabilities (this battler being Mussolini’s error)

Second, the objective must specify the relation between what the army seeks to achieve and what the other armed services seek to achieve.

Third, the army is distinguished from the other armed forces by its primary concern with land warfare and it is enmeshed with them at the land, air and sea interfaces. Each of the media, air, land and sea, have their own distinct stable characteristics (those of e. g solids, fluids, gases) and their own particular forms of heterogeneity (eg land forms and geology, air turbulence, sea states). Military capabilities must relate to pursuit of military ends in these differing environments.

Fourth, if the turbulence of a particular army threat is critically dependent upon air or naval capabilities that are not creditable then the army threat is not creditable.

The objective of the US Army would thus need to be something like following:

- to impress upon its potential enemies its ability, alone or in conjunction with air and naval forces, to inflict a level of destruction commensurate with the desired furtherance or insurance of national policies.