Roles & Missions: Back to the Future

By CARL H. BUILDER

U.S. Navy

The Secretary and the Chiefs in August 1948 at the Newport Conference (from left): Lt Gen Lauris Norstad, Deputy Chief of Operations, Air Staff; Gen Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Chief of Staff of the Air Force; LTG Albert C. Wedemeyer, Director of Plans and Operations, Army Staff; GEN Omar N. Bradley, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army; Secretary of Defense James D. Forrestal; ADM Louis E. Denfeld, Chief of Naval Operations; VADM Arthur W. Radford, Vice Chief of Naval Operations; and MG Alfred M. Gruenther, Staff Director, Joint Staff.

This year's roles and missions debate is likely to be the liveliest since the internecine warfare that led to the Key West truce of 1948. The National Security Act of 1947 was the culmination of contentious efforts following World War II to unify the Armed Forces and to create an independent Air Force. When President Truman signed that act, he also issued Executive Order 9877, defining the functions of the Armed Forces. Differences in the language between the act and the order, however, left an opening for the Navy and Air Force to continue their dispute over air roles. Secretary of Defense James Forrestal and the Joint Chiefs of Staff separately tried to redraft the order, but without gaining agreement. The conference convened from March 11 to 14, 1948 at Key West "appeared to reach agreement on the fundamental issues, chiefly between the Navy and the Air Force,"[1] but subsequent meetings (in Washington and Newport) and memoranda revealed that issues of interpretation remained. In the end, "the decision was not in any wise a victory or defeat for any service," and all the parties accepted an "obligation to work amicably to settle any differences."[2] A truce had been arranged; and it is the prospect of

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lifting this 46-year-old cessation of hostilities that has everyone holding their breath.

Not everything, of course, is up for grabs. Each service has an uncontested claim on core military operations in a particular medium—on land, at sea, across the beach, and in the air—that the others do not want to assume, sometimes even going so far as to denigrate the importance of operations in media other than their own. What is clearly of concern to the services, and what makes their hackles rise, are roles and functions that could conceivably overlap with their own and then be expanded, challenging their preeminence in a traditional domain or medium.

Those overlaps typically arise when a service devoted to military operations in one medium finds that it must conduct operations in another medium to insure its ability to operate effectively in its principal or traditional domain. One hundred years ago, such circumstances were rare. The only two military media were the land and sea—domains of armies and navies—sharply separated by the shorelines and with only occasional interactions at the interfaces (like shore bombardment, coastal defense artillery, and occasional raids ashore). Marines, as sea-going men-at-arms, had not yet staked a claim to the interface between the land and sea as their particular domain. Armies and navies could be assured that almost every engagement would remain on land or at sea, without a threat of significant encroachment by their opposites.

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But transportation technology has changed all that. Military operations in the air blurred the sharp distinction between the land and sea. Armies and navies needed to operate in the air in order to secure their operations on land or at sea. At first, armies and navies used the air only for supporting operations—observation, artillery spotting, and scouting. But the airmen had different ideas about how to use the air as a new medium for military operations, even challenging the pertinence of those forces constrained to operations on land or at sea. That is when the roles and missions debate began. The creation of an independent air force entrenched the debate; and military operations in space have extended it into still another medium.

These are classic turf battles. They occur at the margins between the media dominated by the four services. Air and space operations have become essential to land and sea operations. Moreover, air and space systems are seldom limited to supporting surface operations even when they are specifically designed to do just that; they can often be applied effectively to military ends in any of the media. And when those systems and their capabilities become the basis for budget and force structure arguments, the debate turns into a battle for institutional prestige and survival. That double spillover—from one medium to another, and then from capability to budgets—is what plagued the first great debate over roles and missions almost fifty years ago.

This is not a debate that the services will seek. Too much is at stake. These are issues they would rather see worked at the margins of their turf through bargains and agreements among themselves. Unfortunately for them, the debate is now being provoked by the bill-payers, whose concerns lie elsewhere. For the public, as expressed through the Congress, the issue is not turf but perceptions of waste in the form of duplication: Why do we need four different tactical air forces? Why not just one? Why do we need three different space programs, one for each of the military departments? Why do we need two ground forces? These are the public's questions that will fuel the debate.

But the debate will open a much bigger can of worms. Public questioning will lead to even tougher questions that the services would never raise if left to themselves. What is the role of the Army when the Nation no longer has to defend itself from predatory enemies? Do we still need the Navy when the threat to our commerce on the seas is not other navies but piracy? Why do we need the Air Force operating independently when the principal purpose of airpower is to support surface forces? Those are the gut questions that lurk below the surface of the impending debate.

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Reading the Body Language

For these reasons, the stated or public postures adopted by the services in the roles and missions debate will not necessarily reflect their real concerns, interests, or motivations. To read the body language of the services as they debate, we should keep in mind the following anxieties:

▼ True service concerns can be their vulnerabilities which they may very reasonably prefer not to reveal. With the possible exception of the Marine Corps, the services are uneasy about their justifications for the future—as separate institutions or beyond shadows of their former selves.

▼ The leadership of each service must represent and preside over diverse factions within their own institution; hence, they may prefer not to reveal their true affections for one faction or interest at the expense of others.

▼ The services may not be entirely proud of their motives when hard choices must be made. Like the new car buyer who justifies the purchase as a way of saving on repair bills for the old car, the real reasons don't sound very good except in the privacy of one's own head.

Nevertheless, there are intellectual devices that can help in anticipating the culturally-driven service motivations in the roles and missions debate. Although these devices will not help much in understanding the arcane arguments that will attend the debate, they can be surprisingly reliable guides to the positions taken. In effect, they provide simpler models of why the services will act in the ways they do, even though expressed reasons will be quite different. Here are some questions we should ask ourselves, well before the services take up their debating positions.

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▼ What does each service treasure most that might be put at risk in the roles and missions debate?

▼ What systems (and roles) could be banned or excluded, say, by treaty or national policy without threatening a service?

Combat Camera Imagery (James Bowman)

THE ARMY sees itself, ultimately, as the essential artisans of war, still divided into their traditional combat arms—the infantry, artillery, and cavalry (armor)—but forged by history and the nature of war into a mutually supportive brotherhood of guilds. Both words, *brotherhood* and *guilds*, are significant here. The combat arms or branches of the Army are guilds—associations of craftsmen who take the greatest pride in their skills, as opposed to their possessions or positions. The guilds are joined in a brotherhood because, like brothers, they have a common family bond (the Army) and a recognition of their dependency upon each other in combat.

What is the Army? It is first and foremost the Nation's obedient and loyal military servant. It takes pride in being the keeper of the essential skills of war that must be infused into the citizenry when they are called upon to fight.

What is it about? It is about keeping itself prepared to meet the varied demands the American people have historically asked of it, but especially prepared to forge America's citizenry into an expeditionary force to defeat America's enemies overseas. And in this latter role, the Army accepts (with understandable unease) its utter dependence upon its sister services for air and sea transport and firepower.

—Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War*

▼ Who are the elite factions in each service; and how might shifts in roles and missions threaten them?

▼ Which offspring might the services throw to the wolves if they must to save themselves?

Anticipating the Positions

Here are my guesses at the answers for each of the services. Again, the answers do not reflect what the services will say, but the positions I think they will be driven to by their deeper interests.

For the Navy, the most treasured possession is its capital ships; and for the last fifty years these have been the big carriers. The most important question in the roles and missions flux for the Navy is whether the debate could jeopardize the justification for

their carriers. Naval aviators have dominated the evolution of their service, but not because of the Navy's intrinsic love of aviation. They ascended to the top of the Navy food chain because tail-hook aviators provide the justification for the Navy's capital ships; and capital ships still provide the justification for everything else on, under, and over the sea.

Capital ships and their constituents, once entrenched in the Navy, have not been overturned from within, but by trauma from without. Wood and sail yielded to iron and steam in battle before they did in the minds of naval officers. Battleship admirals lost their ships to bombs and torpedoes dropped by carrier air rather than to the peacetime arguments and theories of naval aviators. Since there is no serious challenge to the capital ship stature of the big carriers from within the Navy,[3] a challenge from outside is the most threatening prospect that could emerge from a shift in roles and missions. The Air Force posed just such a challenge in the late 1940s in arguing the preeminence of *strategic* air warfare. Today, such a challenge would have to center on the need for substantial amounts of sea-based *tactical* aviation. The awkward position for the Navy is defending the idea of several tactical air forces, for it cannot and does not want them all. That is precisely the opposite position of the Air Force which would gladly own them all, only to make the sea-based portion of tactical air forces smaller and subordinate, perhaps eventually to wither away completely.

So, for the Navy, the aspect to watch is whether the roles and missions debate threatens the big carriers. The Navy's stake is the justification for its capital ships, not its existence.

For the Marines, the issue is self-reliance, and that means the certainty of their air support. The Marines never forget a lesson once learned, and one of those lessons was not to trust anyone else to provide support from the air. They learned their lesson at Guadalcanal; and although they might trust the Navy to transport them across the sea, they don't for their air support once they are committed into combat.

Air support for the Marines doesn't mean close air support, in the sense that the Army and Air Force use the term. For the Marines, air support means security from attack from the sky over their heads, transport through the air, and supporting fires from the air. The Marine Corps will not give up any of those critical functions and rely on another service to provide them, even if they are assured that all operations are joint. The Army may not be particularly interested in using the air for land warfare; but the Marines know they must use the air for amphibious and littoral warfare.

So for the Marines the aspect to watch for is whether or not the debate impinges on

U.S. Navy (Tracy Lee Didas)

THE NAVY, more than any of the other services and over anything else, is an institution. That institution is marked by two strong senses of itself: its independence and stature.

The Navy's stature as an independent institution is on a level with that of the U.S. Government (which the Navy must sometimes suffer).

Who is the Navy? It is the supranational institution that has inherited the British Navy's throne to naval supremacy. What is it about? It is about preserving and wielding sea power as the most important and flexible kind of military power for America as a maritime nation. The means to those ends are the institution and its traditions, both of which provide for a permanence beyond the people who serve them.

—Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War*

U.S. Navy (Terry C. Mitchell)

their retention of all that they need to operate independently when they are committed to combat. They expect to win the debate. The stake for the Marines is independence in combat, not their existence.

For the Army, the salient issues in the debate will be associated with assuring mobility and protecting its land forces from threats through other media. The Army is not so much concerned about the use of the sea, air, or space for land warfare as it is about getting to where the war is and being victimized by attacks from the media other than land. For global mobility, the Army remains dependent upon the Air Force and Navy to provide or insure the security of its transportation; to assume those functions for itself would be operationally liberating but fiscally crushing. Air and space defense against attack on land forces is the Army's greatest interest in the domains over its head. If airplanes and ballistic missiles were somehow banned, the Army could only be relieved, even if that ban required them to give up their own (mostly rotary wing) aviation. Part of the Army would like to own the air and space defense functions, but it is not in the mainstream and will not rally the leadership founded in the Army's three senior combat arms or branches.

Combat Camera Imagery (James Bowman)

THE AIR FORCE, conceived by the theorists of air power as an independent and decisive instrument of warfare, sees itself as the embodiment of an idea, a concept of warfare, a strategy made possible and sustained by modern technology. The bond is not an institution, but the love of flying machines and flight.

Who is the Air Force? It is the keeper and wielder of the decisive instruments of war—the technological marvels of flight that have been adapted to war. What is it about? It is about ensuring the independence of those who fly and launch these machines to have and use them for what they are—the ultimate means for both the freedom of flight and the destruction of war.

—Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War*

The Army's deeper concern is not so much the division of roles as between the services, but the Army's role in the post-global war era. Having been the forward defender of the Western ramparts for forty-five years, the Army now finds itself trapped between its affection for the recent past and its longer tradition of service to the Nation. The Air Force and Navy have nothing that the Army wants, but the Marines do. The Marine Corps, by virtue of its combat history and special relationship with the Navy, has gained credibility over the Army for the quick, austere insertion of ground forces in the face of opposition. For the past fifty years the Army could largely dismiss that Marine capability because big wars would require heavier, more sustainable land forces that only the Army could bring to bear. But now the prospect of big, long wars is rapidly receding; and the Army is worried that the Marine Corps may have the land forces that will be the most in demand and, hence, find greater support.

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In 1948 the Army worried that the Marines might "contemplate the creation of a second land army."[4] Today the Army is uneasy that the Marine Corps might be the *only* land army the Nation wants to maintain in readiness to project force overseas during an austere peacetime.

For the Air Force, the issue is the ownership of the best and most airplanes. They would prefer to own all the aircraft, especially all fast, high-performance planes. Basing aircraft, on land or at sea, is not the issue for the Air Force, though they would prefer to see them all land-based, primarily because that is the way to give them higher performance. Of all the airplanes they are willing to give up, it would be the slow, low, small flyers. The Air Force wouldn't fight hard to keep the close air support function or A–10s if the Army wanted them. Next would be the

theater or tactical transports, the "trash haulers." So for the Air Force the cultural clues are to be found in what they treasure most and which offspring could be thrown to the wolves first if forced.

But the Air Force will enter the debate followed by a larger ghost. As the newest service and having had to fight long and hard for independence, the Air Force, despite forty-five years of challenging the other services for preeminence in power and budgets, remains relatively insecure about its independence. Most of the issues in the roles and missions debate have their roots in, or have been exacerbated by, the existence of an independent Air Force. The Air Force cannot help but worry that some may find resolution of the Gordian knots of the roles and missions debate in the dissolution of the Air Force. So the Air Force will hope that the debate can be kept to roles and missions and not become a challenge to the existence of the four military services or three military departments. If the debate spills over to those larger questions, the Air Force will feel exposed.

What about space? It will be an issue because of the external perception of duplication, not because any service wants all the marbles. The military space program is a big ticket item; and the services have learned that their shares of the budget pie will not long benefit from carrying burdens for *national* programs. Yet, no service can afford to abandon this important medium completely to another service to look after their needs. So their posture toward military space will be ambivalent. They don't want to be cut out of the program, but none of them want the program dumped on them as a black hole in their budget. This is one they might rather see become a DOD or joint program.

If the services tend toward these postures in order to protect their most vital yet unspoken interests, what outcome should we expect from this year's roles and missions debate? The current debate, like the one more than forty years ago, has been instigated by the bill-payers; and concerns over duplication (implying waste) will run orthogonal to service concerns over turf (preeminence in their media). Both concerns will intersect again, most clearly at the disposition of tactical aviation. There the stakes will be greatest for both the bill-payers and the services, but they are not of equal weight to the protagonists. On one side, the stakes are money; on the other, they are visions which the services have of who they are and what they are about. Given the disparity of those stakes, the tactical aviation functions are likely to be changed only on the margins. Close air support to the Army could be a sacrificial lamb. The search for savings or appearance of more significant change will have to be taken elsewhere.

And elsewhere is most likely to be found in roles and missions that are mostly associated with the Cold War—in nuclear forces and military space. These are the ones that no longer (if they ever did) go to the hearts of the services, and they will be the easiest ones for which the services might accept transfers in ownership. If the changes which evolve from the debate can be limited to nuclear and space roles, the services will be able to breathe easier—until the next time. Much more by way of change is not impossible, just improbable. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Alice C. Cole et al., *The Department of Defense: Documents on Establishment and Organization, 1944–1978* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, 1979), p. 275.

[2] Ibid., p. 291.

[3] During the Cold War submariners began building a credible challenge to the supremacy of carrier aviators within the Navy, but the end of the era drastically undermined their prospects.

[4] Cole, *The Department of Defense*, p. 282.