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U.S. Marine Corps (P.S. Royston)

Once and Future Marines

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Vietnam.

U.S. Marine Corps (Partain)

Eisenhower called it a "second land army." Recently, a retired Army general referred to it as an "antique luxury." To some it may seem that other services could replicate the Marines. After all, many nations maintain their security without such an institution. While there have always been critics of the Marine Corps, especially in times of tight budgets, questions about its purpose take on greater relevance today as Congress reevaluates the roles and missions of the Armed Forces.

Often regarded as an anomaly, the Marines are actually indicative of a larger anomaly—the American way of war. The Founding Fathers eschewed the European concept of a standing army that could be committed without popular consent. Instead they divided responsibility for defense between the President and Congress under the Constitution. While the President was commander in chief, the duty to "declare war" and "raise and support armies" rested with Congress.

The Nation's initial foreign policy challenges made it apparent that the President needed a limited means of resolving conflicts abroad. Geography, as well as acts of Congress, mandated a naval force. Marines were to be used at the President's pleasure both ashore and at sea. Congress repeatedly affirmed this authority. In fact, legislators would state that this was the most important duty of the Marine Corps.

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Early History

The Marine Corps was created by Congress on November 10, 1775. Early legislation on recruiting marines was unique in directing that care be taken to select men acquainted enough with "maritime affairs as to be able to serve to advantage by sea when required." Congress obviously wanted marines to not just be naval infantry but "soldiers of the sea."

Throughout the Revolution marines served to advantage in various roles—in ships' detachments or fighting beside their blue-jacketed brethren in naval raiding parties. At the end of the war, however, the Corps along with most of the military establishment quietly went out of existence, the feeling being that a standing army was a threat to nascent republics.

the Marines remained virtually unchanged for almost the entire 19th century

That idealism received a sharp blow by 1798. Commerce was being preyed on by Barbary pirates and French privateers. Despite a basically inward focus, there was no escape from the fact that the new United States greatly depended on overseas commerce for its economic survival. This dependence led Congress to recreate a maritime force and quickly pass the Naval Act of 1794 and the Marine Corps Act of 1798. Congress, however, added another sentence to the traditional role and function assigned to marines during the Revolution: now they were also to be used for "any duty on shore as the President, at his discretion, may direct."

There was a good reason for giving the President such discretionary powers. At the time, the United States was hotly engaged with its former ally, France, in a "quasi-war." Hoping to avoid taking on a European superpower in a full-fledged conflict, President John Adams opted to conduct a limited naval campaign designed to get Napoleonic France to respect the Nation as a neutral.

From 1798 to the 1880s, the Marines essentially fulfilled this traditional role and function derived by their Revolutionary War experience and the Marine Corps Act of 1798. When major wars occurred in 1812, 1846, and 1861, the Corps quickly expanded to fight jointly alongside the Army while continuing to support the Navy with ships' detachments. It was a secure institutional existence, and although some still questioned the need for a Marine Corps, its function within the national force structure remained virtually unchanged for almost the entire 19th century.

Roles and Functions Watershed

In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner told the American Historical Association that the United States no longer had a western land frontier. Nearly simultaneously, naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan developed his ideas on the role of seapower in shaping national policy. Without a continental frontier, and given the maritime orientation of our commerce, many saw U.S. interests moving offshore.

However, by the 1890s the Marine Corps, like the horse cavalry, had become functionally obsolete. To many it was a vestige of a bygone era since it no longer fulfilled the traditional role of ships' detachments. Faced with an officer corps numbering only 75 in 1880, even pro-Marine reformers called for a "funeral or resuscitation." But as Presidents and administrations toyed with various organizational ideas regarding the diminutive Corps, the Nation's global outlook changed dramatically with the end of the Spanish American War. Suddenly, the United States found itself a world power with far-flung responsibilities. With national interests stretching from the Philippines to Guantanamo Bay, the need of a seaborne force to protect American interests abroad and, if need be, seize advanced naval bases for a new steam powered fleet became evident.

Thanks in large measure to American experience during the Spanish American War, Mahan wrote a corollary to his ideas on seapower about maintaining a large fleet-in-being: "In the future, the Marine Corps must constitute . . . the backbone to any force landing on [an] enemy's coast."[1] Colonel Commandant Charles Heywood observed after the war that the use of marines in extended operations near Santiago Bay in Cuba "showed how important and useful it is to have a body of troops which can be quickly mobilized and sent on board transports, fully equipped for service ashore and afloat,

to be used at the discretion of the commanding admiral." Although Heywood previously supported keeping marines in a traditional role as ships' detachments, he now proposed creating a 20,000-man force of "well drilled and equipped marines" ready to sail at a moment's notice and respond to world troublespots "without the necessity of calling on the Army."[2]

But this proposal was not meant as a crass attempt to undercut the Army. Heywood, like President John Adams in 1798, recognized that sea-based forces were a means of conflict resolution short of war. By using marines for lesser conflicts a robust Corps would neither compete with the Army nor constitute a second land army. Moreover, committing the Army to overseas intervention meant that a foreign policy threshold had been crossed. Sea-based forces were seen as temporary, hence the cause of less consternation from an international point of view. Again, such an arrangement as suggested by Heywood comported nicely with America's self-image as an occasional world power. Protected by surrounding oceans, the United States opted to bask in relative isolationism.

Vera Cruz was critical to the institutional development of the Marine Corps

Marines as Amphibians

In 1914 it became clear that the United States did indeed have overseas interests beyond its territorial possessions. The Marines received their first test as a seagoing force-in-readiness when President Woodrow Wilson ordered U.S. forces to quell unrest and protect American interests near Vera Cruz, Mexico. The initial landing force consisted of a traditional mix of marines and Navy bluejackets. This had been the standard procedure for decades and naval officers in charge saw no reason to change a proven formula. However, some quickly regretted this decision.

The Vera Cruz operation was critical to the institutional development of the Marine Corps. Moreover, problems encountered during the landing presaged similar and more deadly ones faced by British-led forces at Gallipoli in 1915. The operations served to remind the War Department just how difficult landing on hostile shores could be. For example, even though the Army had prepared for nearly a year to deploy to Mexico, its logistical tail and defective transports foreclosed any hope for rapid deployment. In fact, much to its chagrin, the Army did not arrive until after the fighting was over.

The deployment of naval forces fared only slightly better. Navy bluejackets supporting the landing took heavy casualties in house-to-house fighting, the result of a lack of expertise in land warfare. Because of lessons learned at Vera Cruz, some who participated in the landing, including a number of future commandants—Lejeune, Neville, Russell, and Vandegrift—began to argue for a professionalized force to occupy the critical interstice between an intervention force and larger, more capable follow-on Army forces.

The lessons of Vera Cruz proved important in another regard. They allowed the Corps to resolve an internal debate about its own future role and function within the national force structure. One group of officers, led by double Medal of Honor winner MajGen Smedley D. Butler, favored continued emphasis on deploying small bodies of marines as colonial troops or forces functionally designed for small unit operations to keep the peace in places like Haiti or Nicaragua "where the Marine Corps was already engaged." Others, however, led initially by MajGen Commandant John A. Lejeune and later by a visionary planner, Major Earl H. Ellis, stressed that the Corps should be equipped and trained for instant readiness to not only fight our Nation's small wars but to provide substantial operational support to naval campaigns. For Lejeune and Ellis, this role and function implied an amphibious focus. Further, such emphasis would keep the Marine Corps concentrated as a force-in-readiness for the fleet rather than parceled out in detachments as Butler suggested.

By 1939 the Marines had been used 139 times, mostly for Presidentially directed duties. Secretary of War Patrick Hurley stated in 1931, "The Marine Corps can land on foreign territory without it being considered an act of war, but when the Army moves on foreign territory, that is an act of war. That is one of the reasons for a Marine Corps."

The view of Lejeune and Ellis proved highly successful in the Pacific during World War II. After some severe trials at Tarawa,

Saipan, and Iwo Jima, the Marines developed, in the words of the eminent strategist J.F.C. Fuller, "one of the most far-reaching tactical innovations" to come out of the war, providing a test bed for demonstrating the feasibility of amphibious assaults against enemy-held objectives.

The Army and Marine Corps conducted many amphibious operations both individually and jointly throughout the war. Only a few were single-service operations. Thus, despite the deserved perception of marines as amphibians, the service held no monopoly on such operations. The true and transcending value of the Corps, therefore, was its skillful synchronization of the application of sea-based power projection, making the sea and the shore no longer obstacles that hindered the prosecution of land operations. The Marines became "enablers" for follow-on joint forces. Both the Guadalcanal and Saipan operations indicated this strategic focus.

Post-War Crisis

Like the close of all major conflicts fought by the United States, the end of World War II led the country to reexamine its military infrastructure to determine what sort of post-war national defense organization would be needed. Because amphibious warfare was not the only innovative operational capability to be fully developed in the war, some began to advocate greater investment in strategic airpower and atomic weapons. Many thought that those two breakthroughs alone made land warfare largely obsolete. As a result, distinctions between the roles and functions of the services and their underlying cultures became blurred. More than a few defense officials supported the dissolution or diminution of the Nation's land forces in the name of efficiency and economy.

the Korean War proved to be another roles and functions watershed for the Marines

The Korean War, however, caused such plans to be put on hold and proved to be another roles and functions watershed for the Marines on a par with the Spanish American War. Korea taught hard lessons about limited war and the inability of airpower alone to wage it. By 1952, with the lessons of Korea still being learned, Congress moved to recreate forces able to fight small wars as they had in 1798. Passage of the Douglas-Mansfield Act, sometimes referred to as "the Marine Corps Bill," served to give the Corps a more stable force structure of three divisions and three air wings. But Douglas-Mansfield must be seen in the same light as the Marine Corps Act of 1798. The 1952 law, like that passed in 1798, envisioned using marines "to conduct such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign." The 1952 law, however, contained the sort of ambiguity legislators relish. Naval campaigns are difficult to define precisely. What the law really reflected was the congressional desire for a standing force prepared to conduct contingency operations from the sea. This, of course, implied a focus on expeditionary warfare.

But distinctions among the roles of the services blurred during the Cold War. The surprise of the Korean conflict created a perception that America must be prepared for "no-notice war." The Pentagon favored the sort of military advocated in 1955 by Army General James Gavin: "a sizeable force-in-being, ready to move by land, seas, or air and fight anytime, anyplace." An unintentional result according to one observer was that "the connection between the American Army and the American people was weakened in the name of insuring more rapid response" with an "Army answerable more to the Executive than to the American people."

The consequences of this departure from the American way of war became apparent in the Vietnam conflict. A major portion of the Armed Forces was committed not to a people's war, but to what many viewed as Johnson's or Nixon's war. The War Powers Act was one expression of legislative concern over what some dubbed an imperial Presidency. In the wake of Vietnam, the relationship between the Army and the people was reaffirmed. As General Fred C. Weyand, USA, aptly commented, "The American Army is really the people's army" and "not so much an arm of the executive branch as it is an arm of the American people. The Army, therefore, cannot be committed lightly."

Back to the Future

Successive commandants have reemphasized the expeditionary nature of the Corps in words reminiscent of the Marine Corps

Act and Heywood. General Robert H. Barrow said "we must be prepared to fight anyone, anytime, anyplace. If not, who else?" General Alfred M. Gray stated in unequivocal terms that "the Corps is an expeditionary intervention force with the ability to move rapidly, on short notice, to whatever need[s] to be accomplished." General Carl E. Mundy, Jr., was even more emphatic when he commented that expeditionary warfare as practiced by marines is a "capability that has been carefully designed . . . over the years of historic use to be the cornerstone of United States defense."

In the 1990s the Marines advertise themselves as the Nation's premier force-in-readiness prepared to fight anytime, anyplace. In fact, the Marines have intervened in small conflicts numerous times since 1945. In a long and winding road from the Spanish American War, the Corps seems to have traveled a great circular path that has led them back to expeditionary warfare.

the existence of the Marine Corps ensures strategic balance in an uncertain future

The past has become prologue. Throughout the 20th century ostensible Marine amphibians were called on to do very *un*-amphibious work. In fact, while the identity of the Corps is fixed in the public mind (and perhaps its own) as singularly amphibious, its greatest utility is in conducting expeditionary operations on short notice under a Presidential order.

Nonetheless, some continue to see the Corps as exclusively wedded to amphibious assaults as symbolized by John Wayne's portrayal of Sergeant Stryker in "Sands of Iwo Jima." Having amphibious expertise is important as the lessons of Vera Cruz, Tarawa, and Inchon attest, but the Marine Corps continues to be unique among world military organizations for the sole reason that the United States is unique among nations. Geography, politics, and global focus have mandated that America possess forces of an expeditionary nature. Although the Corps claims a 219-year lineage, it actually has a much shorter functional history—certainly less than a century—although with distinct ties to the era that predates the Spanish American War. Today's Marines have a niche in joint force structure as necessary and relevant as other land, sea, and air forces. They occupy the critical interstice between the shore and the sea while continuing to be a ready means of conflict resolution short of all-out war.

The American way of war reflects geography as well as political culture. The Nation is not landlocked but situated amidst the world's oceanic community. The inherent dilemma we face was described by General George Marshall in 1938: "Geographic location and situation make it literally impossible to find definite answers to . . . who will be our next enemy . . . [in] what theater of operations will [our next war] be fought and what will be our national objectives?"

The existence of the Marine Corps ensures strategic balance in an uncertain future. As a microcosm of the military, it can respond to varied and far-flung crises, which it has done on some 209 occasions since World War II. By doing so the Marines prevent the Armed Forces from being fragmented and misdirected from their intended purpose. This division of labor is fundamental to a strategy which must contend with the possibility of fighting two major conflicts as well as meeting lesser threats. Moreover, the Marine Corps buys time for mobilization—after the American people decide to go to war.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience." So it is for the laws that guide the American way of war. The Marine Corps reflects this approach to warfighting. It is the Nation's warrior class—those ready to go into harm's way to protect national interests from minor international threats. It also allows the citizenry ample time to determine if they will commit blood and treasure to war. These fundamentals are relevant to the United States as it considers an aberration of the Cold War—a large standing military. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Alfred Thayer Mahan, quoted in John J. Reber, "Huntington's Battalion Was the Forerunner of Today's FMF," *Marine Corps Gazette,* vol. 63, no. 11 (November 1979), p. 74.

[2] Charles Heywood, cited in Jack Shulimson, *The Marine Corps Search for a Mission: 1880–1898* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), pp. 193, 197.