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**HOLLOW FORCE, HOLLOW METAPHOR: ASSESSING THE CURRENT
DEFENSE DRAWDOWN**

by

Jon D. Griese

Lieutenant Colonel, US Army

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning and Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College or the Department of Defense.

This paper is entirely my own work except as documented in footnotes.

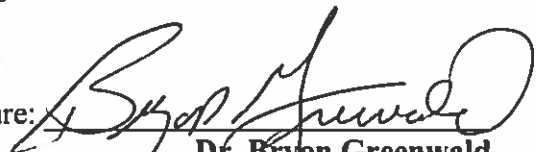
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ABSTRACT

In a 1980 testimony to Congress, the Army's Chief of Staff, General Edward Meyer, used the phrase "hollow Army" to articulate his perception of an undermanned, poorly trained post-Vietnam U.S. Army. While the validity of Meyer's assessment remains disputed, Service leaders still use the phrase as an expedient and vivid way to describe shortfalls in readiness, force structure, and modernization. The phrase's recurring use, typically in periods following conflict, suggests the existence of a "hollow force" narrative perpetuated by senior military leaders: following conflict, politicians cut defense budgets too rapidly and too much, making military forces unprepared for the next war. However, the metaphor itself has never really been defined and is being used in the contemporary defense drawdown by Service leaders in different ways.

This thesis assess how Service leaders are characterizing the impact of the current defense drawdown (post-Operation Enduring Freedom) and specifically examines where and how they are using the "hollow force" metaphor. Service posture statements from 2013 to 2015 are analyzed and qualitatively compared between services along three interrelated areas: readiness, force structure, and modernization. Analysis of these statements suggests that each Service is framing the drawdown in different terms and that muddled metaphors like "hollow force" are preventing political leaders from understanding actual military capability shortfalls. This ambiguity erodes senior military leader credibility and prevents genuine discussions about post-conflict defense policy. The author concludes that "hollow force" is used predominately by ground-centric forces (Army and Marine Corps), but in different ways and in no less clearer terms than General Meyer used in 1980.

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ACRONYMS

ACV	Amphibious Combat Vehicle (U.S. Marine Corps)
ARG	Amphibious Ready Group (U.S. Navy)
BCA	Budget Control Act of 2011
BCT	Brigade Combat Team (U.S. Army)
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations (U.S. Navy)
CSA	Chief of Staff of the Army (U.S. Army)
DOD	Department of Defense
DSG	Defense Strategic Guidance
FY	Fiscal Year
GCC	Geographic Combatant Command
GFMAP	Global Force Management Allocation Plan
HASC	House Armed Services Committee (U.S. House of Representatives)
MEB	Marine Expeditionary Brigade (U.S. Marine Corps)
MEU	Marine Expeditionary Unit (U.S. Marine Corps)
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
SASC	Senate Armed Services Committee (U.S. Senate)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Each service...has traditionally had at its head people who think that their service is the only service that can ultimately save the United States in a time of war. They all want additional manpower and they always will.

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower

The war is over. Now the real fighting begins.

—Afghan Proverb

As the United States Government amassed historic levels of debt, partly due to financing two costly and lengthy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Barack Obama signed into law the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011. The new law established strict measures, including automatic defense budget cuts, which would reduce public debt to more acceptable levels. How the Department of Defense (DoD), specifically, each Service, would absorb these cuts triggered intense debate. Leon Panetta, then Secretary of Defense, stated during a public event in November 2012 that “this is not like periods in the past where we come out of a period of war and the threats diminish and everyone starts cutting the hell out of the defense budget...we are not going to hollow out the force as we have done in the past.”¹

Defining the Current Problem

The Secretary’s choice of words was peculiar. What did he mean by “hollow out the force?” Panetta employed a metaphor used previously in post-conflict periods when political and defense leaders debated the extent and depth of impending defense cuts. Indeed, military and civilian leaders within the DoD have a well-established record of

¹ Paul D. Shinkman, “Panetta to Congress: ‘We Are Not Going to Hollow Out the Force’,” U.S. News & World Report, November 21, 2012, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/11/21/panetta-to-congress-we-are-not-going-to-hollow-out-the-force> (accessed November 3, 2015).

using “hollow force” as a simple, expedient metaphor to describe imbalances in military capability during times of defense reductions. Unfortunately, given its past usage, the term can have a variety of meanings or connotations. This particular metaphor supports a broader, well entrenched narrative among military officers: following conflict, politicians cut defense budgets too rapidly and too much, making military forces unprepared for the next war. However, the metaphor’s vagueness and overuse use by Service leaders has made the metaphor itself a hollow, meaningless expression.

In the current defense drawdown that began in 2013, senior military leaders are using “hollow force” to describe shortfalls in three overarching and interrelated areas that cumulatively describe military capability: readiness, modernization, and force structure. However, if the phrase first emerged during the post-Vietnam era to critique the qualitative social factors of the new All-Volunteer Force, how can one be certain that senior politicians understand how senior military leaders are defining what hollow means today? Moreover, how are today’s senior leaders evaluating readiness, modernization, and force structure and concluding that U.S. forces are hollow or on the path toward being hollow?

Contrary to the overused “hollow force” metaphor, today’s Joint Force is neither broken nor hollow in the same way that the post-Vietnam Army was. Evaluating the three pillars of the contemporary hollow force argument (readiness, modernization, and force structure) exposes how senior military leaders are applying the metaphor in more subtle ways than in the past, but in no clearer terms. Left undefined, continued use of the metaphor by Service leaders erodes the credibility of the advice they provide political leaders.

No military or political leader wants a “hollow force”; the consequences to national security are obvious.² The phrase creates in one’s mind an image of unprepared or ill-equipped forces and certain failure if these forces were ordered into combat. Moreover, the phrase itself evokes a certain urgency for political leaders to fix a problem, whether real or artificially constructed by senior military leaders.³ Most profoundly, the contemporary use of the hollow force metaphor is preventing real, genuine debate about prioritizing defense spending or assessing the risks assumed in the current National Security Strategy because it frames the circumstances of the current drawdown in a way that supports preferred outcomes or decisions.

Conveying the extent that defense reductions are diminishing military capability to the point of creating forces that are unable to accomplish their wartime missions demands a level of precision that the phrase “hollow force” simply glosses over. Yet, if senior military and civilian DoD leaders distill their best military advice down to a pithy metaphor, what are the consequences to civil-military relations?⁴ More broadly, how are senior leaders evaluating readiness, modernization, and force structure and concluding

² This thesis uses the Congressional Research Service’s definition of hollow force (or forces): “forces that appear mission-ready but, upon examination, suffer from shortages of personnel, equipment, and maintenance or from deficiencies in training.” Congressional Research Service, *A Historical Perspective on Hollow Forces*, by the Congressional Research Service, January 2012 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 1.

³ “Military warns cuts would create ‘hollow force’ akin to 1970s,” *Washington Times*.com, February 10, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/feb/10/military-warns-cuts-would-create-hollow-force-akin/?page=all> (accessed October 3, 2015). Senior military officers or defense leaders evoking the “hollow force” metaphor in public forums, or in this case a memo to Congress, typically generates significant press coverage. Paul Shinkman’s article (previously cited) and Rowan Scarborough’s article typifies the headline generating media coverage on the topic.

⁴ Charles Stevenson posits that the dual relationships described in the principal-agent model of civilian-military relationships fails to account for the relationship between three entities: Congress, the President, and the Military. Stevenson notes that the military “is often cross-pressured by its two masters and it often feels compelled to turn to one for relief from the other.” This could explain how Service leaders choose to communicate with Congress if they disagree with a policy endorsed by the President. Charles A. Stevenson, *Warriors and Politicians US Civil-Military Relations Under Stress* (London: Routledge, 2006), xii.

that U.S. forces are hollow or on the path toward being hollow? In the case of the “hollow force” metaphor, Service leaders should abandon the phrase and opt for more precise language. Doing so sharpens the advice they provide and advances a discussion with political leaders about defense spending priorities and the types of risk the nation is incurring in the current defense drawdown.

Background: General Meyer and the Birth of a Powerful Metaphor

In 1980, the Army Chief of Staff, General Edward Meyer, used the “hollow Army” phrase to articulate his perception of an undermanned, poorly trained post-Vietnam U.S. Army.⁵ The phrase was later expanded to “hollow force” by politicians in Congress to convey a growing concern that President Jimmy Carter was not investing enough in defense capabilities in the late 1970s.⁶ Within the context of the time, it was a convincing argument, made more poignant by the threat posed by the Soviet Union. In the end, General Meyer got what he wanted—more funding to invest in training and modernizing the Army.⁷

While the “hollow force” narrative began with General Meyer, it was not until William Darryl Henderson, a retired Army Colonel, validated Meyer’s disputed claim nearly a decade later by concluding in his oft cited work, *The Hollow Army*, that the phrase was an accurate description of the Army the 1970s. However, despite increased

⁵ Meyer stated during a House Arms Senate sub-committee meeting, “*Right now, as I have said before, we have a hollow Army. Our forward deployed forces are at full strength in Europe, in Panama, and in Korea. Our tactical forces in the United States are some 17,000 under strength. Therefore, anywhere you go in the United States, except for the 82nd Airborne Division, which is also filled up, you will find companies and platoons which have been zeroed out.*” From, Jim Talent, “Carter and Obama Militaries Quickly Becoming Synonymous,” *National Review*, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/351028/carter-and-obama-militaries-quickly-becoming-synonymous-jim-talent> (accessed October 3, 2015).

⁶ Frank L. Jones, *A “Hollow Army” Reappraised: President Carter, Defense Budgets, and the Politics of Military Readiness* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 1.

⁷ Polly A. Peyer, “Hollow Force: Scare or Dare” (master’s thesis, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, 1994), 10-11.

defense spending after Meyer's original claim, Henderson applied the term to the Army of the 1980s as well.⁸ Using over a decade of data gathered on the Army's All-Volunteer Force, Henderson focused his analysis on the quality of recruits, the Army's bureaucratic approach to personnel management, and tactical unit performance at the National Training Center. Henderson concluded that structural barriers and adopted practices in the new All-Volunteer Force produced an Army that was at best mediocre.⁹ For Henderson, "hollow force" took on a somewhat different connotation than Meyer, but the end result was the same: a hollow Army not capable of accomplishing its mission.

Careful not to levy accusations of malfeasance on the Army's leadership, Henderson's against-the-grain perspective gained currency among Service leaders. More profoundly, he etched the "hollow force" narrative into the minds of a new generation of military officers. This is evidenced by the emergence of the phrase in war college research projects and theses beginning in the early 1990s. Indeed, Henderson was the vanguard of a new wave of military professional introspection on the emergence of a "hollow force" during the post-Cold War, post-Desert Storm era.¹⁰

The recurrence of Meyer's "hollow" characterization of military forces in post-conflict periods suggests the emergence of a certain perspective among military officers: in periods following conflict or war, political leaders (whether the President, Congress, or both) cut military funding too rapidly or too deep resulting in "hollow forces" (a military

⁸ William Darryl Henderson, *A Hollow Army* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 5-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁰ A search of the Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC) database and the U.S. Army War College database (<http://usawc.libguides.com/current>) reveals that "Hollow Force" and "Hollow Army" were popular research topics or phrases used in research at U.S. military senior service colleges in the 1990s and early 2000s. Most authors writing on the topic, which are almost exclusively senior military officers, cite William Henderson's *A Hollow Army* as a primary source.

unable to achieve its mission due to deficiencies in training, personnel and equipment—the Meyer and Henderson definition).

Echoes of the “hollow force” narrative are evident in current military scholarship and academic introspection, particularly as the war in Afghanistan concludes and defense spending is once again declining. Military scholars writing on the topic in various war college programs in the recent past use the post-Vietnam era (1970s) and post-Desert Storm era (1990s) as case studies in mismanaged, risk-inducing defense drawdowns conducted after conflict. These authors typically draw one of two conclusions. On one hand, “hollow forces” are an inevitable consequence of the post-conflict environment; therefore, the military needs better policies to mitigate the negative effects of uneasy transitions. On the other hand, these case studies demonstrate how civilian policy makers tend to overcorrect during post-conflict drawdowns leaving military forces unprepared for the next conflict; therefore, Service leaders must defend maintaining large standing militaries as a hedge against uncertainty.¹¹

Research Approach and Scope

Applying a case study methodology, this study makes qualitative assessments of Service posture statements from 2013 to 2015 presented to the House and Senate Arms Services Committees (HASC and SASC, or sub-committees therein) and analyzes how Service leaders are applying “hollow” to describe shortfalls in three areas: readiness, modernization, and force structure.¹² While a broad and deeper examination is preferable, space limits this analysis to how Service leaders are using the metaphor in the

¹¹ These two general conclusions are taken from a broad survey of available senior service college and advance military studies theses.

¹² This thesis applies the case study approach as defined by Robert K. Yin in *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, 3rd ed. (California: SAGE Publications, 2003), 13.

current defense drawdown era, defined as post-Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Chapters Two, Three, and Four analyze how each Service describes and assesses readiness, modernization, and force structure—the three pillars of the “hollow force” narrative. Chapter 5 assesses the strength and validity of the contemporary “hollow force” narrative. Chapter 6 summarizes findings, providing recommendations for further study and ways to strengthen how Service leaders convey the state of their forces to Congress.

Analyzing Service posture statements provides two advantages. First, they are comparable over time. Each year, typically between March and April, military Service chiefs and Service Secretaries provide Congress an assessment of the state of their respective Department or Service. Services submit these statements to Congress and they become part of the Congressional Record. Most Services also make these annual statements available on their public web pages. Second, the perspective of Service leaders remains moderately stable from year to year. Barring extenuating circumstances, Service chiefs serve for a period of four years as specified by Title 10, United States Code. This consistency helps mitigate variances, which may include wide swings in priorities, changes in perspectives, or how a particular feature of military capability is defined and measured.

By contrast, one should consider Service posture statements a form of factually based, but nonetheless scripted, messaging designed to evoke a certain understanding among various audiences. While the primary audience is Congress, posture statements are also a way for Service leaders to communicate a particular message to the President, the American public, Service members themselves, and potentially, America’s foes.

What and how a Service chief or Secretary chooses to express, prioritize, or assess can be as significant as what he or she chooses not to mention. As Frank Jones, a scholar from the U.S. Army War College, concluded in his analysis of General Meyer’s original use of “hollow,” context matters. Among other things, Jones criticizes those scholars and military officers that perpetuated Meyer’s “hollow Army” claim for failing to understand or incorporate all the facts and underappreciating the complex interrelationships between the military, Congress, and the President.¹³ Extrapolating Jones’s critique and applying it to the contemporary environment, one should be cautious of drawing hard and fast conclusions about what military leaders are saying today to whom and for what reasons—until, as Jones suggests, all the facts are in *and understood*. At best, one should consider contemporary posture statements as artifacts that exist in a broader context, a context that may not be fully understood or accessible.

It is also important to consider that Service posture statements alone do not represent the summation of all interactions, conversations, testimonies, and communications (formal and informal) between the Pentagon and Capitol Hill. While few official records of these interactions exist (beyond official testimony), these interactions themselves are every bit as important as annual posture statements. Finally, posture statements are unclassified, which limits the extent that Service leaders are able

¹³ Jones, A “Hollow Army” Reappraised: President Carter, Defense Budgets, and the Politics of Military Readiness, 38-50. Frank Jones re-examines Meyer’s original claim in the context of the strained political environment that emerged during President Carter’s last years in office. He concludes that while there were real structural weaknesses in the Army, a deeper analysis suggest Meyer’s characterization of the Army was taken out of context and overstated. Jones believes that a frustrated Meyer deployed the term “hollow” not as a deliberate ploy to criticize Carter’s defense spending reductions, but rather as a way to convey a metaphorical image of the fragile state of the Army. However, Republican members of Congress seized upon the term and expanded it to characterize all services as a way to criticize Carter’s reductions in defense spending. For Jones, the use of the term was politicized and therefore, misused from the beginning.

to articulate specific conditions of risk and under what circumstances these risks are manifested.

Taking into consideration these circumstances, contemporary posture statements can provide some insight into how Service leaders are framing the ongoing defense drawdown. It is worthwhile to consider that General Meyer deployed the “hollow” metaphor during a posture hearing on the U.S. Army and that decades later, the phrase still appears in annual posture statements.

This thesis concludes that while “hollow force” is not a phrase used by all Service leaders as a way to characterize the consequences of the current defense drawdown, certain leaders do apply the phrase to describe capability shortfalls, but in very different ways. Yet, no Service leader defines the terms of the metaphor and thus, the phrase remains ambiguous and meaningless. Continually using “hollow forces” in obscure, undefined ways has real consequences; it erodes the credibility of Service leaders. If one of the principal responsibilities of Service leaders is providing their best military advice to political leaders, then they should avoid using metaphors that lack precision or mask the extent of a problem.

CHAPTER 2: FRAMING READINESS

Melvin Laird and Lawrence Korb, researchers from The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, provide a simple, yet logical, definition of military readiness: “The ability of the currently configured force structure to perform its assigned missions promptly.”¹ Multiple studies have defined readiness in slightly different terms, but most converge on the notion of having the right force at the right time, able to accomplish assigned missions or flexible enough to respond to unknown threats.

Military readiness is an abstract concept, particularly as one moves from technical measurements toward strategic assessments. That Laird and Korb leave “promptly” open for interpretation in their definition highlights an inherent problem with measuring military readiness—defining reaction time. Are forces maintained at a standing readiness level to react immediately, or simply “promptly enough” to mobilize against an impending attack? More broadly, what forces—all of them or only a portion? Another issue with defining readiness is comparability. Measuring the readiness of land forces is different than that of air and naval forces. For example, Laird and Korb highlight how difficult it is to compare the readiness of an Air Force fighter wing to that of an Army brigade or to a Navy cruiser or destroyer. Whereas the Army and Marine Corps frame readiness in terms of generating combat ready Brigades or Regiments, the Navy and Air Force measure readiness in terms of combat ready platforms.²

¹ Melvin R. Laird and Lawrence J. Korb, *The Problem of Military Readiness* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1980), 2. The publication month of Laird and Korb’s study is not known, but the report was published in 1980, which coincides with General Meyer’s “hollow Army” proclamation to Congress in 1980.

² *Ibid.*, 17-26.

Service posture statements since 2013 support this broad generalization, but even more, these statements reveal how each Service leader frames readiness in different terms, making aggregate force readiness more a qualitative judgement. The uneven portrayal of Service readiness demands not just a more precise definition of “readiness,” but more comparable readiness indicators among Services so that degrees of risk are better understood and resources can be better prioritized.

Army Readiness

Secretary of the Army John McHugh and Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA), General Raymond Odierno, assessed in 2015 that the Army is able to meet its current mission requirements defined in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG).³ In terms of maintaining readiness, the leaders stated, “We must insure we have both the *capability* to respond to unforeseen demands and the *capacity* to sustain high levels of readiness” (emphasis added).⁴ What is clear in Army leader testimony as far back as 2013 is the central role budget reductions have played in forming the Army’s readiness narrative—Army leaders see the cuts as inconsistent with an uncertain and volatile strategic environment.

McHugh and Odierno are highly critical of the Budget Control Act’s (BCA) automatic cuts—also called “sequestration.”⁵ They note that the BCA’s arbitrary cuts were established four years ago and never took into account emerging strategic threats

³ John M. McHugh and Raymond T. Odierno, statement made on the Posture of the United States Army, on March 18, 2015, to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 114th Congress, 1st sess., i.

⁴ Army Posture Statement 2015, i-ii.

⁵ Bill Heniff Jr., Elizabeth Rybicki, and Shannon M. Mahan, *The Budget Control Act of 2011* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress), 2012. Sequestration is a procedure in U.S. law intended to cap discretionary spending in the Federal Budget. If Congress enacts appropriation legislation that exceeds spending caps, automatic across-the-board cuts are made affecting the budgets of all Federal agencies and departments by an equal percentage.

and the increasing demand for Army forces.⁶ Furthermore, Congressional infighting over the legal tenets of the BCA generate unpredictable streams of funding that wreak havoc on programing unit level training and frustrate the regeneration of the Army's war-torn fleet. As a consequence, McHugh and Odierno predict that if Congress does not provide some relief from automatic cuts along with steady, predictable funding, the Army will reach a "hollow and precarious state" in Fiscal Year 2016 (FY16).⁷

McHugh and Odierno seem to have accelerated the time the Army would become a hollow force. In 2014, the Secretary and CSA explained in sobering terms how the Army was absorbing reductions in funding while trying to meet mission requirements. That year, the Army's leadership traded 14% of its force structure (from 570,000 personnel to 490,000) and reorganized its tactical formations (reducing from 38 to 32 Infantry and Stryker Brigades) to sustain readiness. Army leaders were also clear about the impact of future budget cuts. If sequestration takes effect, they predicted that by the end of 2019, the Army would no longer be able to meet its DSG requirements.⁸ It's not clear how McHugh and Odierno shifted from assessing in 2014 that the Army may not be able to meet its missions under sequestration by 2019, to a year later assessing that by the end of 2016, sequestration would leave the Army in a "hollow and precarious state."

Equally vague is how Army leaders are drawing the distinction between capability and capacity and how these functions relate to readiness. One can conclude from their 2015 posture statement that they view capability in terms of tactical

⁶ Army Posture Statement 2015, i-ii. Used in this context, demand reflects validated requests from Geographic Combatant Commanders to provide U.S. Army forces or capabilities to support a variety of global requirements.

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ John M. McHugh and Raymond T. Odierno, statement made on the Posture of the United States Army, on March 25, 2014, to the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, 113th Congress, 2-4.

readiness—units that are technically and tactically proficient and able to accomplish assigned unit missions (at the tactical level). Yet, it appears they characterize capacity as the Army's physical posture (maintaining pre-deployed operational fleets, overseas basing, and steady-state unit deployments, for example). They also use capacity to describe the Army's ability to generate and expand its training infrastructure (number of annual brigade rotations at the Army's Combat Training Centers or how long it takes to create a new Brigade Combat Team, for example).

Summarizing their most recent Congressional testimony, McHugh and Odierno noted that the Army currently has sufficient ready forces on-hand to meet its current mission requirements. But, they warn, if BCA cuts are enacted for 2016 or beyond, the Army will be forced to reduce its capacity to generate these forces. As a consequence, sometime between 2016 and 2019 (presumably, depending on the level of defense spending cuts), the Army will not be able to meet its future mission requirements; it will simply not have the capacity to generate the required number of trained and ready combat brigades to meet its directed mission requirements.

In the aggregate, McHugh and Odierno's message to Congress has been consistent—the Army can provide ready forces to meet its obligations, for now. What is less clear is how Army leaders are defining and assessing capacity and capability and how these concepts relate back to readiness. Likewise, it's not clear exactly when McHugh and Odierno are predicting the breaking point of Army readiness—whether it is 2016 or 2019. Nevertheless, it is clear from the testimony that Army leaders are making difficult internal choices to sustain their ability to provide trained and ready forces and, if

left unchecked, continued automatic budget cuts will prevent them from providing trained and ready forces in the very near future.

Air Force Readiness

While Air Force leaders mention readiness in their testimony from 2013 to 2015, readiness as a core aspect of Service capability is not featured in the same prominent manner as it is with the Army. In 2014, the Air Force’s leadership did describe readiness as how well trained and responsive its forces are, balanced between capability (defined as “what we can do”), and capacity (defined as “how much we have to do it with”).⁹ But in 2015, Air Force leaders simplified the model by only referencing the relationship between capacity and capability; readiness simply became an implied outcome of this equation.¹⁰ For the Air Force, readiness is more an implied function of fielding and sustaining a force that is already globally engaged.

In simplistic terms, the linear relationship between capacity and capability is obvious—capacity dictates the volume or rate of delivered capabilities. Yet, in no posture statement from 2013 to 2015 does the Air Force leadership articulate a deeper, more tangible application of these factors and how they relate to Service readiness. One could argue that the summation of each annual posture statement represents the cumulative assessment of Service readiness. In the broadest of terms this may be the case, but anyone outside the Air Force (like a Representative or Senator, for example) would be hard pressed to sort out the supporting evidence in Air Force posture statements

⁹ Deborah Lee James and Mark A. Welsh III, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 14, 2014, to the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, 113th Congress, 3.

¹⁰ Deborah Lee James and Mark A. Welsh III, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 17, 2015, to the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, 114th Congress, 11.

and arrange it in a way that ties these concepts together to produce a clear picture of the Service's readiness. For instance, in 2014 Air Force leaders characterized their readiness problem as simply demand for capability equal to or exceeding available supply. Then further, "Tiered readiness is not an option; your Air Force is either ready or it is not."¹¹ While perhaps stated to drive home a particular point, these curt, emphatic statements do not illuminate the Air Force's state of readiness, how readiness is generated and sustained, or how additional budget cuts impact the Air Force's ability to provide ready units and capabilities to Combatant Commanders.

Semantics aside, what Secretary James and General Welsh do make clear, particularly in their FY16 Posture Statement, is that the Air Force has reached a cross-over point in its ability to generate ready forces to meet existing requirements. James and Welsh make a dire yet definitive statement: any further degradation in capacity ("how much we have to do it with") will result in direct, and possibly irreversible, losses in capability ("what we can do").¹² If readiness is an implied function of a globally committed Air Force, and its leaders are conveying to Congress that they are operating a razor thin margin to meet current requirements, then one can logically conclude that the Air Force is on the verge of a readiness problem.

Unfortunately, the extent and depth of the Air Force's readiness problem is unknown, particularly given the lack of analysis of trends in readiness in its posture statements. The depth of the problem is masked by the emotive tones used by James and Welsh and their choice of using discrete and nearly meaningless readiness indicators (like highlighting the number of aircraft currently in Service that qualify for antique

¹¹ Ibid., 14.

¹² Ibid., 11.

automobile license plates in Virginia, for example).¹³ Interestingly, nowhere in their recent posture statements do James and Welsh assert that the Air Force is unable to meet its 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance obligations. Likewise, nowhere do they explicitly characterize any aspect of the Air Force as “hollow” or being put on a path toward reaching that state.

Navy Readiness

Admiral Jonathan Greenert, the U.S. Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) defines Navy readiness as the department’s ability to generate required capabilities at the capacity it can afford.¹⁴ Greenert divides Navy readiness in two broad categories: “Afloat Readiness” and “Ashore Readiness.”¹⁵ Greenert’s first priority is supporting Afloat Readiness, which he describes as generating naval forces and capabilities that meet DSG and Geographic Combatant Commander (GCC) war plans.¹⁶

Prioritizing readiness afloat sounds logical, but Greenert advised Congress that there are long-term, compounding strategic consequences to this approach. In 2015, Greenert explained to Congress that the Navy was able to meet its obligations outlined in the 2015 Global Force Management Allocation Plan (GFMAP), but that this only represents 44% of global GCC requests.¹⁷ A year earlier (2014), Greenert informed Congress that the Navy’s ability to accomplish two of its ten DSG mission requirements was at high risk.¹⁸ Greenert explains that these shortfalls are a consequence of drastic

¹³ Ibid., 11-15.

¹⁴ Admiral Jonathan Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 12, 2014, to the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, 113th Congress, 6.

¹⁵ Admiral Jonathan Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 4, 2015, to the Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Defense, 114th Congress, 23-24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 12, 2014, 2-6.

cuts in the department's funding that forced him to trade readiness ashore (capacity) to maintain readiness afloat (capability). For example, in 2013, the Navy delayed ship recapitalizations, deferred repairs needed to its shipyards, and scaled back training and base operations to fiscally sustain its global presence and wartime obligations.¹⁹ Greenert advised Congress that these short-term trades are adversely affecting the Navy's overall readiness: the Navy is reaching a point where its capacity ashore is simply not able to generate requirements afloat.

Greenert only employs the "hollow" metaphor once in his annual testimony—in his 2013 posture statement. In this context, Greenert links the metaphor to having more force structure than the Navy can maintain, equip, and man.²⁰ That Greenert prioritized and mostly met readiness afloat requirements in an era of decreasing budgets, albeit by degrading capacity ashore, suggests that if anything, the Navy may now have "hollow" capacity ashore. For the Navy, this could be described as lacking the capacity ashore to generate sustained, long-term readiness afloat to meet current demand and DSG requirements, with little or no flexibility to surge readiness in times of large-scale, major contingencies.

Marine Corps Readiness

Readiness in the Marine Corps is prioritized above all other things. General Joseph Dunford, the former Commandant of the Marine Corps, unequivocally emphasized this point in the first sentence of his 2015 annual testimony to Congress: "The Marine Corps is *the* Nation's expeditionary force-in-readiness."²¹ Dunford frames

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 12, 2012, 16.

²¹ General Joseph Dunford, statement made on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps, on February 26, 2015, to the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Defense, 114th Congress, 2.

Marine Corps readiness as achieving a balance among five pillars: high quality people, unit readiness, capacity to meet combatant commanders' requirements, infrastructure sustainment, and equipment modernization. For Dunford, these pillars represent the “operational and foundational components of readiness” for the Marine Corps.²² Dunford explains that these pillars help him prioritize and balance resources to ensure both current and future readiness.²³

While Dunford has a model for readiness to apply to his own forces, he candidly acknowledges that Marine Corps readiness is inextricably linked to Navy readiness. In his annual testimony in 2015, Dunford explains to Congress that the preferred method of maintaining forward-postured forces is by pairing trained and ready Marines with the Navy's amphibious ships (as Amphibious Ready Groups, or ARGs, with its complement of a Marine Expeditionary Units, or MEUs). Predictably, Dunford notes that the Marine Corps, much like the Navy, is able to meet less than half of GCC crisis response force demand due to the limitations of ready and available amphibious shipping.²⁴ Thus, unlike any other Service relationship, the readiness of the Marine Corps, to an extent, reflects the readiness of the Navy.

As a force-in-readiness, the Marine Corps not only provides deployed and ready crisis response forces to the GCCs, but also a “bench” of trained and ready non-deployed combat units. Dunford warns Congress that this is where shortfalls in readiness are beginning to surface. Whereas Dunford is able to meet GCC demand for crisis forces, he is doing so with Marines that are moving closer to spending an equal time deployed as

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

they are doing training and recovery at home-station. As home-station dwell time decreases, so does the time available to conduct complex, integrated unit-level training events. This imbalance is eroding the “bench” of trained and ready Marine units.²⁵ According to Dunford in 2015, “over half of home-station/non-deployed units report unacceptable levels of readiness.”²⁶ As this bench diminishes, the Marine Corps is losing its ability to surge ready forces in response to unforeseen contingencies.

While assessing that current funding to meet the Marine Corps short-term readiness requirements is sufficient, Dunford informed Congress that, given its current budget, the Marine Corps is unable to fund long-term investments in modernization and infrastructure, thereby placing long-term readiness at risk. In Dunford’s assessment, trading long-term institutional investments in capacity and capability for short-term readiness is driving an imbalance in his five pillars of readiness that, if prolonged, “will hollow the force and create unacceptable risk for our national defense.”²⁷ In similar fashion, Dunford’s predecessor, General James F. Amos, used the same five-pillar readiness model and warned Congress of “hollowing” Marine Corps readiness in his 2013 and 2014 annual testimony.²⁸

Readiness: Analysis and Conclusions

A review of readiness across each Service reveals three noteworthy observations. First, no Service leader has an immediate crisis in readiness—at least for now. With

²⁵ Ibid., 23, 25.

²⁶ Ibid., 23.

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁸ General James F. Amos’s uses “hollow” as related to the Marine Corps Five Pillars of Readiness on pages 13-14 of his 2013 Report to Congress on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps (provided April 16, 2013), and on page 10 of his 2014 Report to Congress on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps (provided March 12, 2014).

Congress' recent approval of a nearly fully funded defense budget for 2016—an event that occurred well after 2015 Service posture testimonies—the dire and immediate consequences from sequestration level funding are removed for another year. All Services should be able to meet existing mission obligations through 2016, notwithstanding unchecked demand from GCCs or a large scale contingency response. What this minimum level of funding does not support is reestablishing a readiness surge capacity for the Army and Navy, or the “bench” for the Marine Corps. It also keeps the Air Force operating on its razor thin margin of readiness, with little spare capacity to react to unforecasted demands. This minimum level of funding may also not prevent the Services, specifically the Navy and Marine Corps, from cashing in additional force generation capacity (investments in shipyards, home-station training, depot maintenance, for example) to sustain force readiness levels.

Second, while each Service leader uses similar vocabulary to describe readiness (mostly in terms of capacity and capability), how they define and apply these terms varies significantly from one Service to another. Similarly, readiness metrics from one Service to the next vary as much as terms and definitions. For example, the CNO of the Navy and Commandant of the Marine Corps both use GCC demand and DSG obligations as their “demand signal” for providing ready forces, yet the Chief of Staff of the Army references only DSG obligations. The Chief of Staff for the Air Force mentions neither as requirements in any of his recent posture statements.

Third, “hollow” as a way to characterize aspects of readiness is used by the leaders of the Army, Marine Corps, and on one occasion, the Navy, but not the Air Force. How the metaphor is used differently by the Services in both context and frequency is

noteworthy. For both the Army and the Navy, “hollow” is indirectly related to readiness and more related to managing force structure (a topic discussed in more detail in Chapter Four). Yet, for the Marine Corps, “hollow” is closely related to readiness. Hollow readiness in the Marine Corps describes the growing divide between the pillars that define Institutional Readiness (Unit Readiness, and the Capacity and Capability to Meet Requirements), and the pillars that define Foundational Readiness (investments in High Quality People, Infrastructure Sustainment, and Equipment Modernization).

The frequency that the Services use the term varies as well. The CNO used “hollow” once in annual testimony since 2012, but the leadership of the Services consisting mainly of ground forces—the Army and Marine Corps—routinely use “hollow” in their testimonies.²⁹ That there is such disparity among the Services in both the context and frequency of the metaphor highlights just how opaque and ambiguous the phrase can be for characterizing something as important as military readiness.

²⁹ From 2013 to 2015, U.S. Army senior leaders used the phrase five times in posture statements, while the Commandant of the Marine Corps used the phrase four times.

CHAPTER 3: FRAMING MODERNIZATION

Returning to Laird and Korb's terms, the two researchers define modernization as, "The rate at which the nation is replacing or adding to its major equipment; for example, the number of tanks, planes, and ships currently being procured in the annual defense budget."¹ Similar to readiness, defining modernization in clear, useful terms is easier said than done. Laird and Korb's definition focuses on an equipment-centric production rate for replacements. While important, production rate alone overlooks the quality and technological sophistication of new equipment (although not explicit, this may be implied in Laird and Korb's definition). Service leaders frame modernization more in terms of capability sophistication rather than production and replacement rates. Yet how modernization is characterized between the Services varies. More broadly, how Service modernization programs aggregate into Joint capabilities remains unclear.

Army Modernization

In their most recent testimony (March 2015), Secretary McHugh and General Odierno all but declared that the Army has a modernization crisis. In very straightforward terms, the Army's leaders informed Congress that due to four years of decreasing defense budgets, they have decreased research, development and acquisition accounts by 35%. As a result, 20 programs were ended, 125 delayed, and 124 restructured. McHugh and Odierno put these cuts in context by noting that even with the passage of the President's proposed budget for 2016 (which did eventually pass), the Army is "more than \$3B short of the historical average as a percentage of the Army's

¹ Laird and Korb, *The Problem of Military Readiness*, 2.

budget.”² While consequential, McHugh and Odierno do not assess or describe the compounding liabilities Congressional leaders are accruing as a result of these decrements to the Army’s modernization programs. At best, they describe how the Army is mitigating the effects of reduced modernization funding—by shifting away from developing and fielding new, more modern combat platforms to recapitalizing the fleet, defined as incrementally upgrading existing capabilities.³

Army leaders drive home two recurring modernization themes in their testimony from 2013 to 2015. First, the centerpiece of Army modernization is the Soldier and enhancing lethality, protection, and situational awareness at the squad level.⁴ Above all other programs, Army leaders prioritize modernization programs at the lowest tactical level. While laudable and predictable for a ground-centric force, this bias for tactical modernization may be over-prioritizing tactical overmatch at the expense of more operationally relevant capabilities (ballistic missile defense, or cyber capabilities).

Second, Army leaders annually remind Congress about the importance of maintaining the Army’s government owned (what they call “organic”) and commercial industrial base.⁵ At first glance, this seems like an insignificant feature to highlight and perhaps only tangentially related to modernization, but for the Army’s leaders, this industrial base provides the production capacity and flexibility the nation needs during war. The Army’s leaders are keen to point out that this is not just protecting a parochial interest of the Army—this industrial base supports the material demands of the Joint

² McHugh and Odierno, statement made on the Posture of the United States Army, on March 18, 2015, 13.

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ McHugh and Odierno describe the criticality of preserving the Army’s organic and commercial industrial base (a central component of Army modernization) in their annual posture statements in 2013 (p10), 2014 (p28-29), and 2015 (p15).

force. With continued cuts in its acquisition and modernization programs, Army leaders are informing Congress that the Army, and more broadly Joint forces, are losing military production capacity that, once gone, is difficult or prohibitively expensive to replace.⁶ Absent from this important point is an assessment from Army leaders about what losing this capacity means in practical terms or how these losses affect strategic risk.

Air Force Modernization

The Air Force modernization program is, as one expects, airframe centric. Throughout their annual testimony from 2013 to 2015, Secretary James and General Welsh describe a tension that exists between modernization versus recapitalization—the choice between upgrading aging aircraft (modernization) or committing resources to develop, test, and field the next generation of technologically superior, but untested, combat airframes (recapitalization).

In 2014, the two leaders informed Congress that the Air Force could no longer accept the risk of modernization, or in their words, “bandaging old airplanes as potential adversaries roll new ones off the assembly line.”⁷ Noting that the “backbone of our bomber and tanker fleets, the B-52 and KC-135, are from the Eisenhower era,” and that the current fourth generation fighter platform averages 25 years of age, James and Welsh warned Congress that these capabilities have long passed the period in which they provided the technological edge needed to gain and maintain air superiority in high-end conflict.⁸ In their 2015 testimony, James and Welsh put the perilous state of their fleet in context by noting, “Today’s Air Force is both the smallest and oldest it has ever been.”⁹

⁶ McHugh and Odierno, statement made on the Posture of the United States Army, on March 18, 2015, 15.

⁷ James and Welsh, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 14, 2014, 9.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James and Welsh, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 17, 2015, 12.

For a nation that has come to rely on airpower in pursuit of its national security interests, James and Welsh describe a dire situation.

With their preference toward recapitalization made clear, James and Welsh prioritized Air Force acquisition programs accordingly—toward big ticket, technologically advanced airframes: the KC-46A aerial tanker, the F-35A Joint Strike Fighter, and the Long Range Strike Bomber (LRS-B).¹⁰ To keep these major acquisition programs operating on minimally feasible production timelines, James and Welsh have taken risk with the Air Force’s infrastructure by cutting funding for maintenance and repair of facilities and bases. Whereas the private industry standard is apportioning six to eight percent of an annual budget for these expenditures, the Air Force’s leadership has reduced this to just 1.9 percent of its annual budget.¹¹ With an Air Force that is stretched to its operational limit, James and Welsh seem to be accepting near-term risks while pursuing what they believe is the type of Air Force that the nation needs for the future. The two leaders emphatically drive home this point to Congress: “Recapitalization is not optional—it is required to execute our core missions against a high-end threat for decades to come.”¹²

Navy Modernization

In 2013, the CNO’s second budgeting priority, behind remaining ready to meet current challenges, was building a relevant and capable future force. Admiral Greenert, the Navy’s CNO at the time, directed that modernization in the Navy pursue a dual track of incremental capability updates to the existing fleet balanced with fielding new classes

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² James and Welsh, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 14, 2014, 9.

of ships and aircraft already in development. Interestingly, much like the Army's leadership, Greenert notes the importance of sustaining the Navy's maritime industrial base, specifically, the nation's shipbuilding capacity. While the strategic importance of maintaining this capacity is perhaps implied, Greenert makes explicit that a steady, predictable budget for the Navy prevents disruptions in ship design and building and thus, keeps production costs down.¹³

Congress seems to have heeded Greenert's advice. In 2014, Greenert reported to Congress that all the Navy's major shipbuilding and airframe programs, fully funded by Congress in 2013, were on track to meet future production goals.¹⁴ Thus, sustaining a relevant industrial base shifted from his second priority in 2013 to his sixth priority in 2014.¹⁵ However, by 2015, Greenert signaled to Congress an emerging tension within the Navy. The cumulative effect of keeping the Navy's large acquisition programs on track came at the expense of deferring infrastructure investments and fleet maintenance. This trade-off, according to the CNO, was putting the Navy at risk of not being able to meet its DSG obligations.¹⁶

Greenert warned Congress that the practice of keeping the Navy's shipbuilding program on track, but underfunding the remainder of the Navy's budget will, by 2020, prevent the Navy from having the capacity to execute large-scale operations in one theater while simultaneously deterring an adversary in another.¹⁷ Although fiscal shortages may indeed be forcing the CNO to make some near-term trades that increase

¹³ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, in March, 2012, 8-12.

¹⁴ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 12, 2014, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 4, 2015, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

risk, Greenert himself projects that these risks may not be realized for years to come. Moreover, these risks are measured against the goals of the 2012 DSG, which by 2020 may no longer match the strategic environment. Congress's reaction to the CNO's 2016 annual testimony should reveal how it perceives these longer term risks. Regardless of whether or not they heed the CNO's request to fund the Navy's entire requested annual budget, Congress seems willing to keep the Navy's robust ship and airframe programs on track, thereby protecting the Navy's maritime industrial base for years to come.

Marine Corps Modernization

When it comes to modernization, the Commandant of the Marine Corps routinely highlights both the Service's reputation for frugality and the "value" the Marine Corps provides the Nation with just modest investments in modernization. As General Amos noted in his 2013 testimony, the Marine Corps has the smallest modernization budget among the Services. As such, Amos leverages the modernization investments of the other Services (collaborating with the Air Force on its Joint Strike Fighter program, for example). This allows the Marine Corps to focus on delivering Service specific capabilities, like the new Amphibious Combat Vehicle (ACV)—the Commandant's number one FY15 budget priority.¹⁸ Yet, because of their reliance on other Service acquisition programs, across-the-board budget cuts to the DoD have disproportional effects on the Marine Corps' comparatively small modernization budget. General Amos noted in 2014 that as a result of absorbing reductions in funding while redeploying,

¹⁸ Amos, statement made on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps, on April 16, 2013, 23-26.

reconstituting, and resetting equipment used in combat for over a decade, he has had to delay elements of his modernization plans to preserve current readiness.¹⁹

General Dunford provided the clearest articulation of the state of Marine Corps modernization in recent testimony. In 2015—Dunford’s first and last time testifying as the Commandant of the Marine Corps—he informed Congress that as a consequence of prioritizing readiness to meet near-term requirements while Service budgets declined, the Marine Corps’ modernization timelines have been “stretched” to the limit. Any further extension, Dunford noted, “could result in a Nunn-McCurdy breach and reduce industry interest in producing limited production items.”²⁰ Whereas the larger Services are able to better absorb budget cuts and have more direct control over prioritizing certain procurement programs over others, the Marine Corps lacks this acquisition flexibility. With its diminutive budget and reliance on other Services’ major acquisition programs, the Marine Corps’ modernization program is, in effect, the DoD’s canary in a coalmine. The point when the Marine Corps can no longer afford its own modernization plans should serve as advance warning to Congressional leaders of the broader state of U.S. defense modernization.

Interestingly, unlike the Army’s penchant for prioritizing tactical modernization at the Soldier level, the Marine Corps views modernization in broader operational terms. Rather than focus on exploiting tactical overmatch, the Marine Corps prioritizes developing capabilities that enable it to project combat power, gain theater entry, and sustain Marine units on a limited basis. The Commandant’s FY16 modernization budget

¹⁹ Amos, statement made on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps, on March 12, 2014, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28. The Nunn-McCurdy Act sets in place cost controls in DoD acquisition programs. A single program’s costs that exceed 25% of original cost estimates require automatic reporting to Congress. See the Congressional Record, May 14, 1981, S5010.

for procuring Marine Corps specific combat platforms supports this more operational perspective. For example, in 2015, Dunford prioritized funding for three core platforms: a new line of amphibious assault vehicles; increased load capacity for heavy-lift rotary platforms; and the procurement of a short take-off, vertical landing version of the Joint Strike Fighter.²¹ However, as budgets tighten and procurement timelines stretch further into the future, none of these programs are safe from elimination, particularly due to the Marine Corps' limited production scale.

Modernization: Analysis and Conclusions

How Service leaders are pursuing and characterizing modernization suggests a much broader connotation of the concept than Laird and Korb's production-centric definition. While material production rates are a feature of modernization, Service leaders frame the concept more in terms of maintaining a technological (or asymmetrical) advantage over an adversary. The leaders of the Army and Navy also consider Service owned and commercial industrial capacity as an aspect of modernization; a much broader interpretation of production rates alone. Despite these points of convergence, Service leaders view the scope, focus, and even terms of modernization in very different ways.

Both the Navy and Marine Corps attempt to strike a balance in their respective modernization programs between upgrading existing capabilities and developing new, more technologically advanced platforms. This is perhaps a reflection of a common association and alignment under the same Service secretary. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the Army and Air Force. On the one hand, Army leaders placed on hold the Service's development of next generation ground combat platforms so that they can focus

²¹ Dunford, statement made on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps, on February 26, 2015, 10-17.

on resetting combat worn equipment and upgrading its existing fleet. On the other hand, the leaders of the Air Force have judged that they can no longer afford maintaining their current fleet of aging aircraft—they must invest in a new generation of aircraft to match the nation’s expectation for possessing the most capable and technologically superior air force in the world.

The Army and Air Force’s modernization differences also extend into how its leaders define and apply “recapitalization.” For no apparent reason, the Army and Air Force apply the term in precisely opposite ways. For the Army, recapitalization means making investments in the existing fleet. For the Air Force, it’s defined as investing in the next generation of aircraft and not the current fleet. This disconnect has obvious consequences as Service leaders send mixed signals to Congress about what is being recapitalized, and by whom.

Finally, other than the leaders of the Army mentioning the broader Joint implications of cutting into the Army’s industrial base, modernization tends to be framed by the investment and production of individual lines of Service specific aircraft, ships, and vehicles. Thus, when Service leaders talk about the criticality of investing in a specific platform, it is nearly impossible to put the expenditure (or specific, tailored capability) in a Joint or even broader context.

CHAPTER 4: FRAMING FORCE STRUCTURE

Force structure is defined by Laird and Korb as, “The number and type of major units currently possessed by the armed forces.”¹ Major units, in this case, are brigades and regiments for the Army and the Marine Corps, wings for the Air Force, and ships and submarines for the Navy.² The obvious shortfall of trying to limit force structure to defined, comparable units is not accounting for sizeable portions of a Service that do not fit neatly into these groupings, like Joint and Service headquarters, training cadres, and specialized units or platforms. Likewise, the total size of a particular Service, typically called end strength, is not captured in Laird and Korb’s definition.

Service end strength represents a composite unit of measure that describes the overall size of a Service (typically, all components). Service leaders use end strength figures for year-to-year comparisons or future aim points. This broader aspect of force structure suggests that established definitions fail to capture the contemporary and relevant aspects of force structure and how they can vary among the Services.

Army Force Structure

Based on recent testimony, Army leaders view force structure first in aggregate terms—the total of all Active, Guard, and Reserve forces—then in terms of the number of combat brigades that this end strength can support. However, since 2014, this linear relationship has been skewed by the Army’s massive efforts to gain cost and capability efficiencies by restructuring its Brigade Combat Teams and aviation architecture. While

¹ Laird and Korb, *The Problem of Military Readiness*, 2.

² Laird and Korb originally defined major units as ground divisions for both the Army and Marine Corps. As both Services have moved away from division-centric formations, brigades and regiments are more accurate units of measure for the Army and Marine Corps.

Army leaders still annually report the number of Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) they are able to generate, this year-to-year measure has been overshadowed by a dominating focus on how defense cuts are driving the Army toward what its leaders believe is an arbitrary end strength.

In 2013, Army leaders noted that as a consequence of BCA spending cuts, they were reducing the size of the Active component by 80,000 soldiers to reach a total end strength of 490,000 personnel by the end of FY17.³ By 2015, additional budget cuts prompted Army leaders to state that they were accelerating these cuts; the size of the Active component would now be reduced to 475,000 by the end of 2016 (a 17% reduction of the Active Army from a wartime high of 570,000). Comparatively, the Army's Guard and Reserve components, reduced 4.5% and 3.4% respectively, were spared most of the drastic cuts absorbed by the Army's Active component.⁴

In both their 2014 and 2015 testimony, Army leaders established a floor for its Active component end strength that it was unwilling to go below: 450,000 personnel. This was the absolute minimum Army leaders assessed they needed in the Active component to fulfill the Army's DSG obligations.⁵ Even if not forced to reduce to this floor, at 475,000 personnel, Army leaders noted that the Active component will be smaller than it was pre-2001.⁶

While perhaps meaningful in aggregate terms, the overemphasis on the Army's bottom line personnel figure masks the massive force restructuring program directed by Army leaders to generate as much combat power as they can out of its reduced end

³ McHugh and Odierno, statement made on the Posture of the United States Army, in May, 2013, 1.

⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵ McHugh and Odierno, statement made on the Posture of the United States Army, March 18, 2015, 1.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

strength. For example, Army leaders are cutting the total number of Active and Guard Brigade Combat Teams—the Army’s principal tactical formation—to 60, but increasing the size of most Brigades by nearly one third.⁷ Perhaps more dramatic but no less turbulent is the near complete restructuring of Army aviation. Between retiring aircraft (OH-58D Kiowa Warrior and TH-67 JetRanger) and shifting aircraft between components (trading the Guard’s attack aviation for utility aircraft in the Active component), McHugh and Odierno are trying to “better align force structure with limited resources and increase unit capacity.”⁸ While the two leaders applied this logic specifically to Army aviation, this rationale describes their broader approach for managing the Army’s end strength reductions without the benefit of a corresponding decrease in the demand for Army forces.

Air Force Force Structure

Similar to the Army, the Air Force’s approach toward managing its force structure lies in finding the optimal balance between its active, guard, and reserve components. Yet unlike Army leaders, who draw a direct link between the BCA’s cuts to personnel reductions, Air Force leaders do not make this direct association, despite the personnel reductions absorbed by the Air Force since 2001.⁹ The clear link that Air Force leaders do establish is the relationship between budget cuts and the divestiture of legacy aircraft or

⁷ Out of 60 total BCTs, 47 BCTs (29 Active, 18 Guard) will be reorganized with a third maneuver battalion. The disaggregation of older BCTs into this composite structure makes annual, year-to-year, comparisons of total BCTs difficult; these figures provide no real comparative means to measure the “health” of Army force structure.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ James and Welsh, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on April 12, 2013, 3, 8-9, 24.

the redistribution of older airframes to the Guard and Reserve components.¹⁰ The number and density of airframes among the Air Force's components, more than any other factor, drives how the Air Force's leadership characterizes the state of its force structure.

Only in their most recent testimony did Air Force leaders signal a problem with their total personnel end strength. In 2015, James and Welsh stated that, "Unable to cut airframes we believe we need to divest or to reduce excess base capacity; the Service has cut personnel—taking risk in human capital."¹¹ Likely referring to the planned, but halted divestiture of the A-10 Thunderbolt II, the U-2 Dragon Lady, and the KC-10 Extender, James and Welsh's message to Congress was clear—keeping aircraft beyond their programed lifespan comes at a cost. In this case, Air Force leaders cut 44,000 personnel to maintain these aging aircraft in the fleet (leaving 662,000 personnel in all components by FY14, with 313,000 personnel on active duty). James and Welsh concluded in 2015 that with the number of airframes and personnel on hand, the Air Force "simply cannot get any smaller or we risk being too small to succeed."¹²

Navy Force Structure

Force structure for the Navy is defined by its "Battle Force" concept—the annual accounting of the Navy's operational ships by the Secretary of the Navy and reported to Congress. In 2014, Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus explained that as a consequence of prioritizing the ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001, the size of the Battle Force decreased from 316 to 278 ships. Mabus also noted that since he took office in

¹⁰ This link is made explicit in Secretary James and General Welsh's testimony submitted to Congress in 2014. See: James and Welsh, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 14, 2014, 8.

¹¹ James and Welsh, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 17, 2015, 15.

¹² Ibid.

2009, 60 ships have been placed on contract and if the requested Presidential budgets remain fulfilled, the Navy will stay on track to reach 300 ships by 2019. Mabus argues that the Navy requires expansion of the Battle Force to 300 ships to meet its DSG mission requirements.¹³

While the Secretary of the Navy describes the Battle Force in aggregate terms, the CNO, in his annual testimony from 2013-2015, provides a detailed accounting of ships retired, built, dry-docked, commissioned, or already in service. Throughout this accounting, the CNO describes in detail the numbers and types of ships the Navy requires to support each of the Service's ten mission DSG mission requirements, and importantly, where the Navy will assume risk if Congress does not fully fund its annual budget.¹⁴ Albeit briefly, the CNO also addressed the status of the Navy's end strength. In 2014, he informed Congress that the Navy's end strength stood at 323,600 active and 57,300 reserve personnel.¹⁵ A year later, he informed Congress that the Navy would grow to 330,000 active and 58,900 reserve personnel by 2020.¹⁶ Concurrent with the Battle Force increasing by more than 20 ships by 2020, the Navy will increase its end strength by 8,000 personnel. Despite the downward pressure on defense funding, Congress appears willing to invest in long-term naval capabilities while keeping the Navy's end strength largely intact through 2020.

¹³ Ray Mabus, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 12, 2014, to the House Armed Services Committee, 113th Congress, 11-14.

¹⁴ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 4, 2015, 8-13.

¹⁵ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 12, 2014, 14.

¹⁶ Greenert, statement made on the Posture of the United States Navy, on March 4, 2015, 30.

Marine Corps Structure

Similar to the Army, the Marine Corps' aggregate measure for force structure is its end strength. Yet with a relatively small reserve component as compared to the Army, Marine Corps leaders tend to focus on the size of the Marine Corps' active component. In 2013, General Amos testified that the Marine Corps was on glide path to reduce its active component from 202,100 in FY12 to 182,100 by FY16— a 9.9% overall reduction.¹⁷ A year later, after conducting a mission review to inform the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, Amos testified that the Marine Corps, if required under sequestration, could reduce to 175,000 personnel.¹⁸

This “redesigned” Marine Corps, according to Amos, would reduce both the capacity and capability of the Marine Corps. Reduced to 175,000, the focal point of the Marine Corps operational forces would shift from its traditional Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) construct to a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEBs) centric concept, what Amos calls a “middle weight” force. According to Amos, while a MEB-centric force is capable of meeting steady state requirements, this shift incurs significant strain on the force as fewer available units exist to meet mission requirements. With these force reductions, Amos notes the Marine Corps would experience a deployment to home station ratio of 1:2 (one month deployed to two months at home station). This is far below the Marine Corps' optimal 1:3 goal required to sustain its long-term readiness objectives.¹⁹

¹⁷ Amos, statement made on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps, on April 16, 2013, 14.

¹⁸ Amos, statement made on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps, on March 12, 2014, 12.

¹⁹ Ibid.

According to General Dunford in 2015, an optimal end strength of 186,800 personnel would reestablish the Marine Corps 1:3 deployment ratio. However, with his promise to provide the best Marine Corps that the Nation can afford, Dunford informed Congress that the Marine Corps was reducing to 182,000 personnel by 2017. Dunford explained that at this level, the Marine Corps is able to fulfill its DSG mission requirements, but at just above a 1:2 deployment ratio. Unable to achieve its optimal 1:3 deployment ratio, Dunford highlighted the cumulative effects on his forces. A Marine Corps operating below a 1:3 deployment ratio erodes readiness as opportunities for collective training at home station, critical for maintaining capable response forces, are reduced. More broadly, Dunford notes that this deployment ratio adversely affects morale within the ranks as Marines spend less time with their families.²⁰

Force Structure: Analysis and Conclusions

The contemporary characterization of force structure found in Service leader testimony from 2013 to 2015 suggests a broader meaning than Laird and Korb's discrete focus on the number and types of major units a Service possesses in a given year. Comparing these testimonies reveals three notable trends. First, Service leaders characterize force structure in one of two ways, either in terms of personnel or by combat platforms. While the leaders of the Army, and to an extent, the Marine Corps, use major unit types to characterize force structure (the annual inventory of BCTs and MEBs for example), these ground-based Service leaders tend to focus more on annual personnel end strengths in their year-to-year comparisons of force structure. On the other hand, Air

²⁰ Dunford, statement made on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps, on February 26, 2015, 10-11.

Force and Navy leaders focus their testimony on the number and type of major combat platforms to articulate year-to-year comparisons of force structure.

Second, as a way to convey risk, all Service leaders established force structure floors—numerical points that they are unable to go below while still having sufficient forces available to meet mission obligations. For the Army and Marine Corps, this is articulated in personnel (yet even here, the Army’s floor includes all components, whereas the Marine Corps established a floor only for its Active component). Even the airframe-centric Air Force recently established a minimum personnel floor. Only the Navy’s leaders established a platform-centric floor and one that they expect to reach in the future—the 300 ships needed by 2020 to fulfill the Navy’s DSG obligations.

Third, force structure is malleable; Service leaders manipulate force structure to balance other Service priorities. For example, the leaders of the Army, Marine Corps, and to an extent, the Air Force, have all reduced force structure to sustain readiness. Yet how these “trades” manifest themselves within the Services is very different. In the Army, aggregate force reductions decreased the number and type of available BCTs (converting some BCTs to Battalion Task Forces and converting some mechanized units to light infantry) and triggered a complete realignment of its aviation structure. For the Air Force, modest reductions were required to retain fleets of aging aircraft. The Marine Corps manipulates its structure to achieve a more optimal deployment ratio for its operational forces. While there are obvious limits to how much force structure a Service can trade for readiness, that most Service leaders are making these trades to sustain readiness suggests that they are trying to avert having excess force structure on hand that they simply cannot afford to train.

CHAPTER 5: ASSESSING THE “HOLLOW FORCE” NARRATIVE

While contemporary Service leaders are not universally applying “hollow force” to describe the state of their respective forces, some leaders do occasionally use the phrase. Who uses the metaphor and how they are applying it to characterize readiness, modernization, and force structure, provides insight into how the meaning of the phrase is shifting from a more general meaning to more Service dependent terms.

Is Readiness “Hollow”?

Of all Service leaders, the Commandant of the Marine Corps most closely uses “hollow” to characterize force readiness. The Commandant applies the metaphor to describe a growing gap in the Marine Corps’ readiness model rather than a measurable feature of his forces (the growing gap between Institutional Readiness and Foundational Readiness). Rather than implying that his forces are ill-equipped, untrained, and not able to meet their assigned missions—the traditional meaning of “hollow forces”—the Commandant is using the phrase in a more abstract, theoretical way. Applying “hollow” in this more theoretical and ambiguous way potentially masks the extent and depth of actual readiness shortfalls in the Marine Corps.

While all Service leaders articulate readiness in more ambiguous rather than practical terms, each leader applies a remarkably similar theoretical approach for how they generate and sustain readiness. All Service leaders describe readiness as striking a balance between capacity, capability, and mission obligations. Using this readiness framework, Service leaders have been universally clear in their testimony: despite decreasing budgets, they are still able to maintain acceptable levels of readiness. As budgets decline, all Services have scaled back modernization programs and the Army,

Air Force, and Marine Corps, have absorbed reductions in force structure to pay for readiness. While incurring some additional risks by making these trades, that all Service leaders are still able to meet current mission obligations suggests, at least for now, that the readiness of the Joint Force is not “hollow.”

Is Modernization “Hollow”?

Whereas the leaders of the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps have all chosen to sustain modernization programs (albeit, in some cases, with scaled back ambitions), Army leaders have shelved modernization plans to focus on upgrading the existing fleet. Yet, no Service leader has described the state of their respective modernization programs as “hollow.” However, this is not to say that budget reductions are not affecting modernization programs or that modernization is occurring evenly across the Services. While the Navy and Marine Corps are selectively reducing modernization programs to meet current requirements, the Air Force and Army have taken very different paths. Air Force leaders recently announced that they are divesting older airframes rather than repair them so that they can focus on building next generation airframes. Conversely, Army leaders have deferred modernization programs so that they can focus on resetting and upgrading their existing fleet. This creates two potential scenarios. In the near term, this could produce a ready and capable land component but an antiquated air component. Or, in the long term, it could produce an obsolete ground force paired with the most modern Air Force in the world. While modernization across the Services may not be characterized as “hollow,” an uneven modernization approach, specifically, between the Army and Air Force, could have broad and unpredictable impacts on Joint Force capabilities and readiness in the future.

Is Force Structure “Hollow”?

Army leaders most closely associate “hollow” with force structure. In their testimony, Army leaders have been clear in linking defense cuts to corresponding reductions in force structure. But rather than frame the cuts as hollowing out Army forces, a massive internal restructuring of BCTs and aviation structure suggests that Army leaders are trying to avoid having excess forces on hand that are, in the commonly understood meaning of the phrase, hollow—forces that are ill-equipped, undermanned, and unable to accomplish assigned missions. Army leaders have also been clear in their testimony that they have reached a limit to this restructuring; any additional force reductions would put the Army’s ability to meet mission obligations at risk.

As noted in Chapter 4, force structure is malleable. All Service leaders have testified that as budgets decline, they have traded force structure to support other Service priorities, typically readiness. As budget cuts began in 2013, these force structure reductions are most apparent in the ground Services—the Army and Marine Corps (reduced 17% and 9.9% respectively). All Service leaders have also recently established force structure floors that they cannot go below and still have sufficient forces to meet mission obligations. For the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps, these floors are expressed in personnel. For the Navy, it is expressed in the size of the Battle Force (in number of ships). That Service leaders have drawn this proverbial line in the sand suggests that existing force structure is not “hollow.” However, these force floors also suggest that if budget cuts continue, Services leaders no longer have the flexibility to trade force structure to maintain readiness.

Is Contemporary Use of “Hollow Force” Justified?

The periodic use of “hollow” or “hollow forces” in annual posture statements is limited to the Army and Marine Corps. Since Army leaders are applying the metaphor to describe some future state that should be avoided, while Marine Corps leaders are using the metaphor to describe a growing theoretical gap in its abstract readiness model, routine use of the metaphor—unless redefined in more specific, contemporary terms—is unwarranted. Whereas in the past, the metaphor was applied broadly to characterize the state of forces, the metaphor is now being selectively used by Service leaders in more subtle ways, either to articulate acute shortfalls (current readiness in the Marine Corps), or as some historical state that must be avoided in the future (returning to the deplorable state of the post-Vietnam Army).

CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Analyzing and comparing Service leaders' testimony since the Budget Control Act began reducing defense budgets in 2013 provides insight into how Service leaders are absorbing reductions to their budgets. In recent Service leader testimony, the use of "hollow force" is not as pervasive as expected—at least for now. As sequestration remains a real, annual possibility, the two Services that already use the metaphor, the Army and Marine Corps, are likely to expand its usage making the term a more central feature of annual testimony.

More broadly, recent Senior leader testimony reveals a certain opaqueness—where precision is needed, leaders tend to overly simplify (recall Air force leaders stating, "Your Air Force is either ready, or it's not."), or use similar words in very different ways ("recapitalization" used differently by the Army and Air Force, for example).¹ Notably lacking in all testimony is any real articulation of the broader Joint context that makes a particular Service shortfall noteworthy or extraordinary. For example, what are the broader implications of the Army's decision to defer its modernization programs, or the Air Force's decision to no longer invest in the existing fleet? The following four recommendations intend to help Service leaders close the gap between an acute Service issue and broader understanding. Adopting these recommendations protects the integrity of the advice they provide to political leaders.

¹ James and Welsh, statement made on the Posture of the United States Air Force, on March 17, 2015, 14.

Recommendations

First, and perhaps most apparent, Service leaders should avoid using metaphors like “hollow” or “hollow force” as expedient, pithy ways to articulate military capability to political leaders. Using “hollow force” masks the depth and extent of actual shortfalls in military capability. Moreover, these metaphors, particularly one as historically distinctive and emotive as “hollow force,” evokes a sense that there is an immediate problem that must be solved—but the problem itself is not apparent. The unfortunate consequence of continually using “hollow forces” in obscure, undefined ways is that it erodes the credibility of Service leaders. If one of the principal responsibilities of Service leaders is providing their best military advice to political leaders, then they should avoid using metaphors that lack precision or mask the extent of a problem.

Second, making military capability (readiness, modernization, and force structure) more comparable between Services illuminates where risks are being assumed during the defense drawdown. Simple benchmarks, like ability to meet DSG mission obligations and deployment tempo (ratio of time deployed to time at home station), are already used by some Services. These metrics should be applied more evenly and comprehensively across all Services. Comparing the Services along like terms helps put the drawdown in context. Moreover, comparability helps expose where risk is approaching unacceptable levels or where one Service is generating unrecognized risk to another. The Army’s wholesale divestiture of its modernization program and the impact to the Marine Corps, and for that matter, the rest of the Joint force, is the most apparent example of unrecognized risk.

Third, similar to common benchmarks, Services should adopt common terms of reference that describe both military capability and the types of actions Service leaders are taking during the drawdown. Common terms add a level of precision sorely lacking in recent Service posture statements. This is not a suggestion for imposing some prescribed, arbitrary reporting format on Service leaders. Rather, the descriptive terms that Service leaders already use should be defined and applied the same way across each service. The most glaring example of how terms are being used in very different ways is how the Army and Air Force leaders have defined “recapitalization” in contradictory ways.

Fourth, the Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) must help the Services frame their posture statements within a broader strategic and Joint context. The strategic consequences of the drawdown from Service to Service are not apparent; each Service views these consequences through their own lens and biases. The Joint Staff and OSD have a unique vantage point that allows them to see across the Services, interact with all Combatant Commands and Defense Agencies, and have direct access to defense policy makers. Although analyzing how Service staffs interact with the Joint Staff and OSD as they develop posture statements is outside the scope of this paper, given the substantial inconsistencies between recent statements, these staffs should have a more prominent role. These staffs could help Service leaders put their assessments and priorities in a broader Joint context and could aggregate, assess, and adjudicate the types of risk that may not be apparent to an individual Service leader. For example, as the Army elects to defer modernization efforts, there are broader Joint implications, particularly for the Marine Corps and its modernization programs.

Areas For Further Study

As mentioned earlier, this thesis focused on one form of communication (an artifact) that exists within a much broader process and environment that formulates defense policy. This particular form of communication is also one dimensional. There is no sense from analyzing posture statements alone about how a recipient received the message or what was done with the information; one would have to review each committee meeting record to assess how the HASC and SASC received the posture statement. Just as Frank Jones conducted an extensive study of the context surrounding Meyer's original mention of a "hollow Army," a similar level of analysis would help gain a better appreciation for how the phrase is being used today, by whom, and ultimately, for what purpose. This level of rigor and analysis would require access to official and unofficial sources including correspondence between the military, Congress, and the President; classified assessments and reports; and personal interviews with key players (a good portion of Jones' research includes interviews with key individuals and their perception of events after the fact, including Meyer himself). A step toward achieving this level of analysis is tracing the relationship between what is communicated in Service posture statements and what is reflected a year later in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). In other words, how is Congress informed by Service posture statements and where and how is this understanding reflected in law?

Internal to the military, this thesis exposes a variety of areas that lack congruency in the way military capability is defined and assessed. The accepted and occasionally institutionalized definitions for readiness, force structure, and modernization do not seem to apply evenly or even coherently between the Services. Nor do these concepts

aggregate well in total force assessments—for example, how does a readiness crisis in a single Service like the Army affect Joint readiness or the readiness of a Geographical Combatant Command? Similarly, as the relative size of the military decreases (in some cases, to historic lows), but the technological sophistication of these forces increases, do the accepted concepts of what constitutes readiness (or modernization, for that matter) still apply? If Services fail to innovate in a modern context and exploit technological advantages, can these smaller forces be trained and ready, yet “technologically hollow”? Finally, how do these changing conditions affect force structure, particularly when expressed by the ground-based Services in terms of total personnel? Indeed, if any leader in the future chooses to use “hollow force” to characterize military capability or Service posture, the phrase may adopt a meaning that resembles nothing like General Meyer intended back in 1980, or anything like how the phrase is used today.

Conclusion

Since the contemporary use of “hollow force” still has a variety of meanings depending on who uses it and how it is applied, it is not possible to make a declarative judgment of just how “hollow” the Services are and for that matter, what this really means for the Joint Force. Because of its vague meaning, Service leaders are better off avoiding the phrase and using more precise language to articulate shortfalls in military capabilities.

Reducing defense budgets following periods of conflict should be an expected logical consequence of establishing a more stable security environment. Despite the political decision to conclude Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014, no appreciable peace dividend has emerged. On the contrary, one could argue that the strategic environment is

even more tumultuous than it has been over the past decade. Nevertheless, in 2011, a political decision was made to arrest government spending and reduce the government's debt. Service leaders are now expressing the consequences of reducing available means while strategic ends remain fixed.

While all Service leaders assert that they are able to meet existing mission obligations, military readiness across the board is perilously close to collapsing—readiness is being consumed as fast as Services can generate it. Likewise, Service leaders are admittedly mortgaging future readiness as they decrement force structure and modernization to meet acceptable levels of readiness.

Given this portentous situation, it is not surprising that Service leaders are occasionally using strong, emotive phrases or images in their recent testimonies. This tendency will likely continue and possibly worsen as Service leaders annually reassess budget decrements and worst-case funding scenarios under sequestration. Yet, continued use of vague and emotive metaphors, like “hollow force,” masks the extent and depth of a particular problem. Moreover, it puts politicians in a position to do something, whether helpful or not, to address the issue. Precise, accurate language cannot only help cut through the vagueness of what “hollow force” really means, it also makes the advice that Service leaders provide Congress more credible and meaningful.

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