

A costly oversight

THERE SEEMS TO BE a growing acceptance among defense planners of the so-called "short war" concept, which holds that there'll be only one battle — the first and the last — if war erupts in Europe between the NATO and Warsaw Pact nations. In that view, which currently appears to dominate U.S. strategic planning, that battle will be short, decisive and of high-intensity, probably involving tactical nuclear weapons, and we and our allies must "win the first battle" — or lose the war.

The opposite side of this seeming preoccupation with the short, one-battle war is that it's hard to find much concern over the possibility of a more protracted conflict, and the need to provide the units, equipment and other assets that would give us staying power.

It must be recognized that the terms "short war" and "protracted conflict" are purely relative. Under current terms of reference, even a "protracted conflict" would be brief compared with previous wars. And the short war would be measured in mere weeks.

The short-war philosophy has its attractive aspects, if one can attach so grotesque a term as "attractive" to so hideous a prospect as war. It envisions a conflict so brief that military casualties might well be limited to only those forces on the scene or able to reach the scene of battle in the first few weeks of combat. It likewise provides a comforting but illusory rationale for those who want to reduce defense spending, manpower, equipment purchases and other resources.

But it is a dangerous, one-shot strategy that provides no margin for error. If we have misread the intentions of our potential adversaries, the Soviet Union and its pact allies — if a war should commence and both sides avoid the use of tactical nuclear weapons in deference to world opinion — then we are left with only two, equally unthinkable alternatives — early resort to strategic nuclear weapons, or defeat!

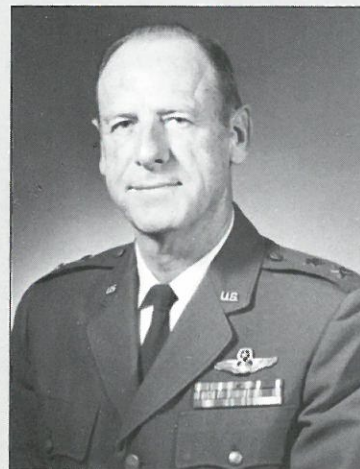
In leaning so heavily toward the short-war doctrine, we appear to be demonstrating, again, our tendency to make a virtue out of unpleasant necessity. And the sad aspect of it all is that it's a self-imposed necessity, rooted in pressures that are being applied to national decision-makers by an unrealistic but highly articulate segment of our society. That pressure is focussed on Congress and thence onto the Department of Defense, and has led to severe and repeated prunings of manning levels, equipment procurement and other resources. Defense planners respond by tailoring war plans to fit attainable resources rather than to realistic appraisals of the threat.

My assessment may be simplistic and somewhat exaggerated for the sake of emphasis, but I believe it fairly represents the final result of the process by which we became wedded to a short-war strategy.

The National Guard has a direct and crucial stake in our strategy. We're at the farthest end of the pipeline for equipment. Units that don't have adequate quantities of usable equipment on hand or immediately available can't be deployed to a combat zone in time to affect the outcome of a so-called "short war." Acceptance of the short-war doctrine, valid or not, fuels the efforts of those who want to reduce defense spending still further. And that means reducing equipment purchases and making it impossible for equipment-short units to ever attain deployability!

The short-war doctrine scarcely recognizes even the possibility of a more protracted war and it thus is fallacious and questionable, in our view. Moreover, it pays little heed to the deterrent effect of maintaining powerful, battleworthy, adequately equipped backup forces in the Guard and reserve, ready to augment our active forces should a war come which doesn't fit our budget-slanted plan.

The latter may well turn out to be the most serious and costly oversight of all, for if our armed forces are too small and under-armed to be credible, deterrence fails. We thus increase the possibility of war while reducing our ability to win.



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Although he was not a militiaman, General Montgomery likely would have become one of Washington's great field commanders in the Revolutionary War. His death during the attack on Quebec, as depicted in this painting by Alonzo Chappel, was a real blow to the spirit of the militia. (Cover art courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.)

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