

THE MARITIME STRIKE UNIT:  
CENTERPIECE FOR A NATIONAL MILITARY STRATEGY

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## DEATH NELL FOR THE NAVY?

The Congress of the United States is in the process of making an error of catastrophic dimension. By mandating substantial naval force reductions, Congress is jeopardizing our potential as a maritime power, endangering our economic well being, and reducing our ability to continue to act as a stabilizing influence in world affairs. It is particularly ironic that these force reductions come at a time when a strong Navy can become the centerpiece of our national military strategy.

Today's dramatic naval cuts are not without precedent. In November of 1921, the World's five leading naval powers met in Washington for the Naval Arms Limitation Conference. The American delegates to the conference were only too eager to support the United Kingdom's proposals for drastic reductions in naval tonnage. With the defeat of Germany only three years previously, there were no threats on the horizon, and a growing recession made expenditure of the large sums of money required to sustain a navy increasingly difficult for Congress to support. The result of the conference was to impose significant restrictions on America's shipbuilding program, including the scrapping of a number of ships in construction. The following years were not kind to the Navy--depression followed recession, and isolationist and pacifist propaganda plunged naval funding to new lows. Added

to the Navy's woes was the dogma of false prophets such as Colonel Billy Mitchell, who predicted that airpower would render navies obsolete. The results of America's neglect in maintaining a navy in the 1920's and 30's are well documented, and the initial overwhelming superiority of the Japanese Pacific offensive, as well as the German U-boat campaign in World War II, were directly attributable to this neglect.

Today's situation bears a remarkable resemblance to that bleak period in the inter-war years. With the break up of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact, it is indeed difficult for many to envision threats on the horizon. Recession, isolationism, and pacificism, have once again focused American perspectives inward. Congress continues to initiate massive reductions in naval funding--necessitating mothballing of battleships, scrapping of aircraft carriers, and slowdown or outright cancellation of shipbuilding programs. Once again, we hear the voices of the prophets who denigrate the Navy's role in national military strategy.

The results of neglecting our Navy in the post WW I era were predictable, as are the potential results of similar neglect in the post cold war era. My thesis is that the Navy has an even more important role to play in today's world than in the past--The American Navy should not only remain strong, it should

become the cornerstone of our Nation's military strategy. This idea is by no means new. It was conceived and developed by one of the foremost historians and naval strategists of the nineteenth century--RADM Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan found an apt disciple in President Theodore Roosevelt, and Roosevelt's vision of the "great white fleet" and "gun boat diplomacy" laid the foundations for America's emergence as a twentieth century super power. Mahan's theory of sea power is as relevant today as it was nearly a century ago--it is time once again for the Navy to assume its role as the primary instrument of our national policy.

#### MAHAN'S VISION OF AMERICAN SEAPOWER

As a naval advocate, Mahan would have pointed out that America's development as a twentieth century superpower was directly attributable to the country's naval buildup in the late nineteenth century and WW II period. Mahan's thesis that economic success is dependent on a nation's ability to develop and protect its sea line of communications (SLOCs) is reflected on the one hand by America's economic growth; and on the other by the Soviet Union's economic collapse. The United State's geographic position allowing direct maritime access to the resources and markets of both Western Europe and the Pacific rim was a key factor in this growth, and the supremacy of America's two ocean

navy was critical to the defeat of the Axis powers during WW II. Since this time, the American Navy has been called upon in over two hundred crises around the globe. Mahan would have been quick to point out that America's dynamic ocean-going naval presence brought global stability to a degree that could never have been matched by the largely coastal Warsaw Pact Navies.

Mahan's advice to build a strong navy was never more relevant than it is today. In an era of multi-lateral force cutbacks, it is undoubtedly the Navy which provides the best return on investment. Both the Army and Air Force are losing overseas bases which in the past were central to strategic planning. Large standing armies lack the mobility and cost effectiveness inherent in the naval task force. Air Force units lack the forward presence and self sufficiency available to naval units. It is precisely the mobility, efficiency and effectiveness inherent in naval forces which led Mahan to emphasize seapower's importance. Technological developments and tactical innovation have made the navy a more important instrument of national policy than even Mahan envisioned. The cruise missile and ship launched strike aircraft have replaced the battleship as the centerpiece of sea power. Perhaps most importantly, the development of sophisticated amphibious transport ships and high speed landing craft have truly integrated navy and ground forces. The resulting power

projection capabilities exceed even Mahan's wildest dreams.

My argument that the Navy should become the centerpiece of our national military is not intended to deny the importance of maintaining a modern, capable army and air force--rather it is to suggest that the Navy become the apex of the pyramid formed by our armed forces. The Navy has the potential to be used as an instrument to counter most of the expected threats of the 21st century, and to be used as a wedge for the employment of Army and Air Force units when that threat exceeds the Navy's capabilities. But what you ask, are those threats? To answer this question, we must turn once again to Mahan.

#### THE THREAT

If protection of sea lines of communication is the critical factor in safeguarding a our Nation's economic interests as Mahan suggested, what forces threaten these lines? The Warsaw Pact is dead, and there are no nations which can challenge America's maritime supremacy. The answer to this question is found in the instability within the many countries adjacent to the vital economic waterways in America's economic sphere of influence--Western Europe, the Middle East, Western Asia, and South East Asia. Today these countries include Yugoslavia, Ukraine, the Baltic Republics, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Libya,

China, and North Korea--tomorrow may bring a new cast. These regions have been made increasingly unstable by the proliferation of non-conventional weapons and delivery systems; historic ethnic, religious, and political conflicts; and demographic pressures such as overpopulation and refugees. The United States is critically dependent on maritime commerce to and from these economic spheres of influence--importing over 80 percent of our overseas petroleum and mineral resources by water. The two ocean access which made America a great economic power also makes the United States critically vulnerable to regional instability within these spheres.

Conflict in these regions is likely to be sudden and widely dispersed. In the absence of a strong U.S. deterrent force, economic interdiction by the nation states in these regions becomes increasingly probable. This interdiction is becoming an attractive means of accomplishing political, military, and economic objectives for two reasons. First, economic SLOCs are becoming increasingly vulnerable to interdiction by small, well armed, and relatively inexpensive surface combatants; particularly in vital choke points such as the Red Sea, Straits of Hormuz, Malacca Straits, and Straits of Japan. A determined third world country can use high performance aircraft and a small missile configured navy in "hit and run" tactics which can have a dramatic impact on



the flow of vital products. The growing availability of coastal cruise missiles and highly capable diesel submarines makes these SLOCs even more susceptible to interdiction. Iran's recent acquisition of state of the art German made diesel submarines, as well as North Korean made Scud missiles highlights the vulnerability of critical economic SLOCs to third world interdiction. Second, vital commercial staging points and ports are becoming increasingly vulnerable to interdiction by highly mobile land forces. Seizure of any of the key ports would have a significant impact on American economic interests. This vulnerability was graphically illustrated with Iraq's "blitzkrieg" offensive into the oil fields and ports of Kuwait.

Third world countries will initiate this economic interdiction when in their leaders' judgment, the potential benefits to national objectives outweigh the risks of military intervention by a distant and reduced American armed forces. For example, it takes little imagination to envision Iran using newly acquired submarines and cruise missiles in attempt to close the Straits of Hormuz to commercial traffic. This virtual stranglehold on much of the world's petroleum resources would return Iran to a position of domination in the Middle East and Western Asia.

In the past, a strong army and air force presence was integral to America's focus on the Warsaw Pact threat in Central Europe,

and naval forces were used to protect the "flanks" of this area. Today, the threat has shifted from a continental center to the third world regions on these flanks--particularly to the southern flank. In an increasingly multi-polar, economically interdependent world, the threat to American interests posed by these countries is very real. The solution to this threat is resident in the ships, aircraft, and Marines of the United States Navy.

#### THE MARITIME STRIKE UNIT--INSTRUMENT OF NATIONAL STRATEGY

The 1992 National Military Strategy calls for an American military force which can exploit forward presence, technology, strategic agility, and power projection to deter aggression, counter threats, maintain stable regional balances, and ensure access to foreign markets. The Army has responded to this challenge by creating lighter, more mobile forces and by developing an improved maritime lift capability--in essence, creating capabilities similar to the Marine Corps. The Air Force is experimenting with the concept of composite wings for improved operational flexibility--much like the airwing on an aircraft carrier. Unlike the other services, the Navy requires no modifications, no restructuring, and no additional funding to meet these challenges. Today, only the navy can freely operate on over 75 percent of the earth's surface. Only the Navy-Marine Corps team

can provide the rapid response and operational flexibility necessary to accomplish our national military objectives--not through large fleet engagements as Mahan envisioned, but in the use of highly specialized forces acting as a maritime strike unit (MSU).

The surface ships of the MSU are the key elements which support the national military strategy. This is not to suggest that submarine forces do not have an important role to play in our national strategy. Inter-continental ballistic missile submarines will continue to play a key nuclear deterrent and counter-strike role, arguably to the exclusion of the other air and land elements of our nuclear triad. With the absence of a significant naval threat, the role of our attack submarines should undoubtedly shift to maritime disruption as was done in the Pacific campaign during WW II, and to use of cruise missiles in support of power projection operations. Despite the continued importance of these subsurface forces, it is the highly visible surface units of the MSU which play the critical role in our maritime and national strategy.

During peacetime operations, the MSU can perform a broad spectrum of maritime operations which include drug interdiction, disaster relief, nation building, non-combat evacuation, protection of American citizens and property abroad, anti-terrorism, and forward presence. In time of crisis, the mission of the MSU is

four fold--presence (deterrence), area denial, power projection (aircraft and cruise missiles) and amphibious assault (marine units). The MSU concept provides the capability to accomplish these missions in response to an escalating threat in a flexible and sequenced manner. The American strike carrier remains the centerpiece of the MSU, however it must be supported by 5-6 surface combatants (AEGIS configured CG/DDG) with a strong Anti-Air Warfare (AAW) capability to counter the third world aircraft and missile threat, as well as a cruise missile (TASM/TLAM) capability to support the carrier's power projection role. This firepower, organic aircraft support, speed, and emission control flexibility will allow the MSU to fight and survive in the projected threat environment of the future.

Finally, the MSU is composed of 5-6 amphibious units (LHD/LSD) necessary to transport and support a marine expeditionary unit (MEU). The LHD also provides the MSU with additional VTOL/VSTOL (AV-8/V-22) air power, which in some scenarios may negate the requirement for aircraft carrier support. Integral to the MSU concept is the ability to tailor the component parts in any combination--surface action group (escorts only), carrier strike force (escorts and aircraft carrier), or amphibious force (escorts, aircraft carrier, and amphibious units) in response to a rapidly changing threat. Each of these mixes supports a specific

MSU mission.

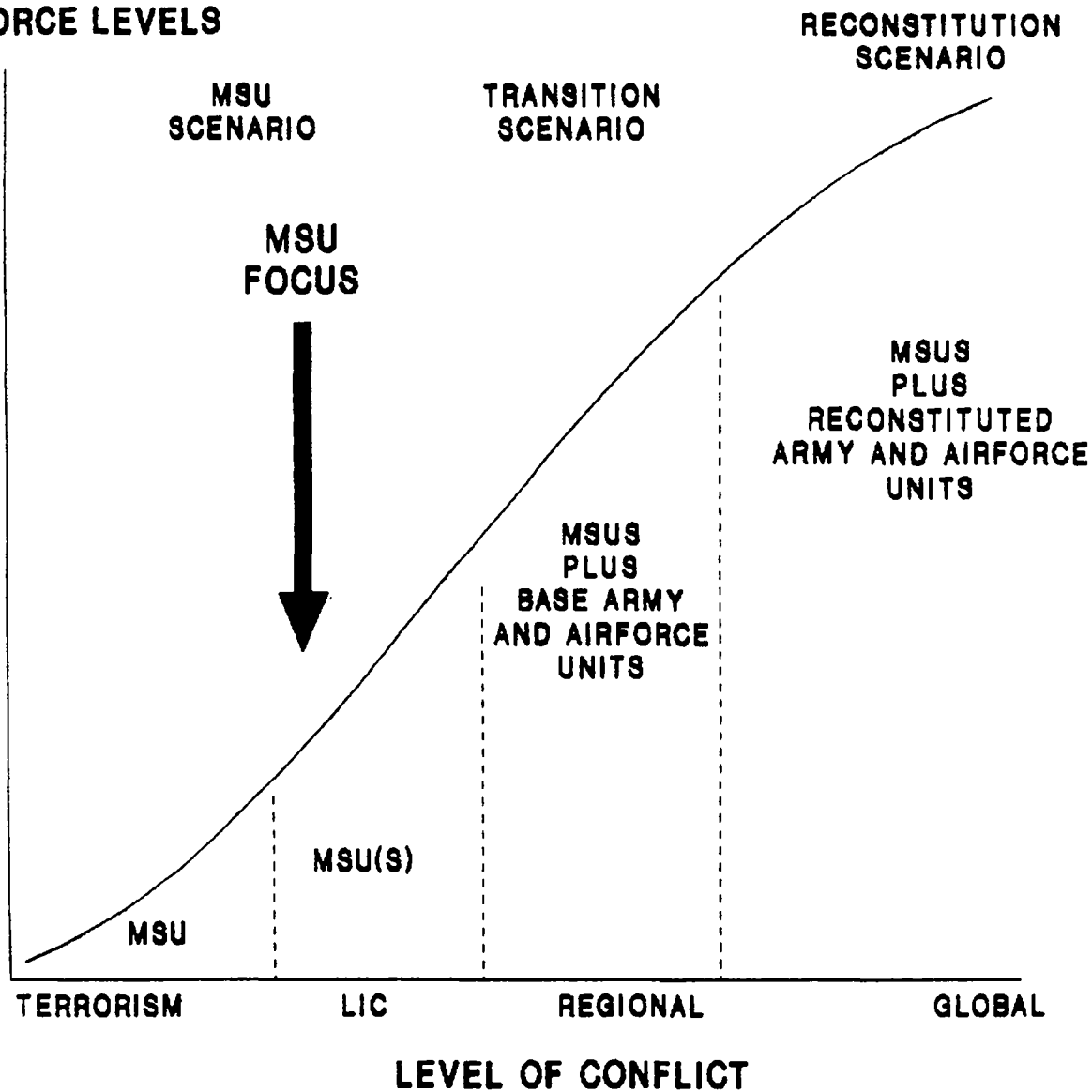
#### MSU EMPLOYMENT

The MSU may be structured to rapidly respond to the spectrum of crisis in the 21st century--from terrorism to low intensity conflict (LIC). MSUs can be employed singly or in combination--multi-carrier and marine expeditionary brigade or force (MEB/MEF) structure may be required to meet threats at the high end of the LIC spectrum. The MSU is also compatible with a reconstitution concept--acting first to deter, and then to delay and hold as force levels are expanded to support a global conflict. The flexibility of the MSU allows it to be integrated first with base army and air force units, and then with reconstituted units as force levels are increased. In this scenario, the MSU acts as an enabling component for joint, multi-service operations. The relationship between MSU force levels and the threat is depicted in figure (1).

The flexibility of the MSU is the cornerstone of its employment in LIC scenarios. A specific MSU mission is dependent on the relative threat to America's economic interests. Third world posturing which threatens SLOCs may require the use of surface combatants in a presence/deterrence mission. Aggressive action by a third world country may require the use of escorts or carri-

# THE MSU AND THE SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT

FORCE LEVELS



HIGH

PROBABILITY OF OCCURRENCE



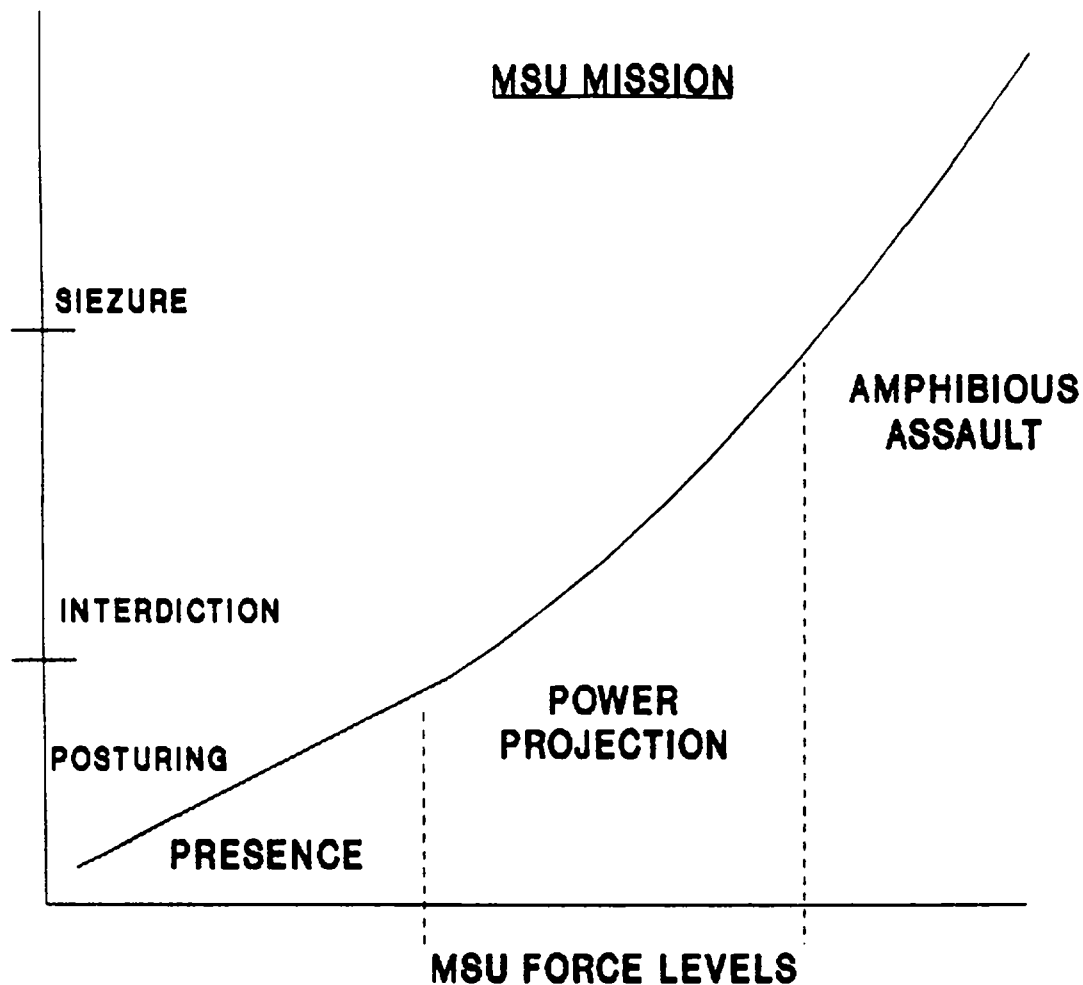
FIGURE 1

er air power in an area denial role--an economic blockade to provide bite to America's diplomatic actions. SLOC interdiction by a third world country may require the use of aircraft carriers and escorts in a power projection role. Finally, actual seizure of a port or vital economic area may require employment of Marines in an amphibious assault role. The relationship between the degree of threat and the MSU mission is depicted in figure (2). MSU composition may be phased as a threat escalates, or employed in its entirety to meet a threat that has already approached the high end of the LIC spectrum. In all scenarios, the MSU provides the CINC with the capability to bring overwhelming firepower to bear at the right place and at the right time.

Effective employment of the MSU requires intelligent staging and homeporting of the ships, marines, and supplies necessary to support its mission within our Atlantic, Pacific, and Mediterranean economic spheres of influence. A dynamic maritime strategy demands continual MSU (aircraft carrier/combatant) presence within the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Far East theaters, and at least a periodic presence in the Indian Ocean theater. Amphibious units and forces can be forward staged at existing overseas bases, however the visible presence of naval combatants with power projection capability is critical to the MSU concept. Assuming a ratio of three aircraft carriers to each one deployed

# MSU EMPLOYMENT IN CRISIS RESPONSE

THREAT TO  
ECONOMIC  
INTERESTS



## MSU COMPOSITION

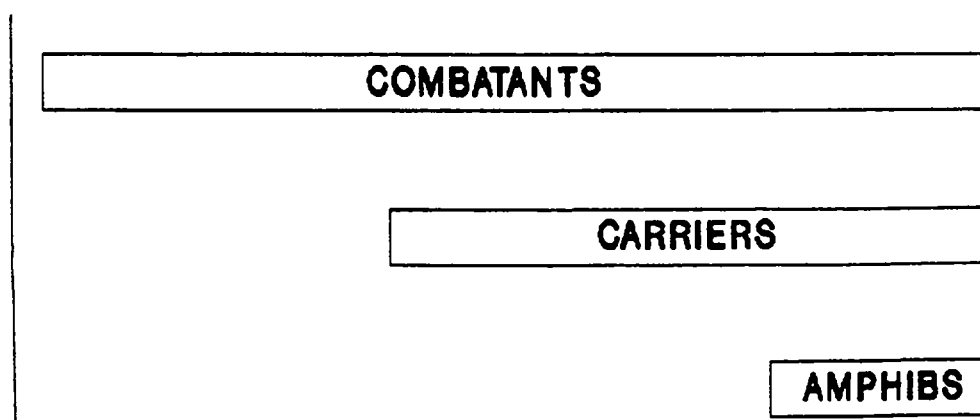


FIGURE 2



(one in transit, one in work up, and one in overhaul), this goal necessitates maintenance of a minimum of 12 aircraft carriers and associated combatant escorts, as well as the logistic, lift, and mine warfare ships necessary to support MSU operations. In short, the present proposal for a 12 carrier, 450 ship Navy is the absolute minimum acceptable force level to support the MSU strategy--further cuts will leave critical gaps in our ability to maintain a naval presence in our economic spheres of influence. Perhaps of equal importance, we must not allow funding levels to erode our edge in naval technology. Development and construction of advanced combatants (DDV), amphibious units (LHX), and attack aircraft (AX) are critical to maintaining a maritime force which can effectively counter the full range of threats in the 21st century.

#### SUMMARY

Recent world events highlight the vulnerability of our economic interests to interdiction and disruption by third world countries. The Warsaw Pact may indeed be dead, but there remains a need for a force to maintain stability in a turbulent and volatile world. That force is the navy--acting as the centerpiece for a maritime strategy which is the cornerstone of our national military strategy. The means to this end is the MSU--a dynamic

and flexible employment of ships, aircraft, and Marines which allows controlled commitment in a ladder of escalating crisis ranging from terrorism to LIC.

The MSU focuses on Mahanian economics--securing America's economic interests through maintenance of SLOCs and vital ports and staging areas. The MSU's missions include humanitarian operations, presence/deterrence, area denial, power projection, and amphibious assault. The MSU provides a viable and relatively inexpensive alternative to maintaining large standing armies and air forces. While the MSU focuses on LIC as the most probable scenario, it also provides a logical interface for force buildups in a reconstitution scenario.

The MSU concept provides our country with a combat ready, immediately responsive, expeditionary capability. The MSU requires little or no foreign basing overseas, and can be inserted and withdrawn with relative ease. This mobile, forward positioned concept provides America with the means to safeguard our economic interests, and to maintain peace and stability in the turbulent world of the 21st century. Our Congress would be well advised to keep this in mind as they structure future budgets--the Navy must remain strong if we are to continue to play an important role as a great maritime power.