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A Letter from the Field....

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Course 5605 -- Military Strategy And Operations

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by

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This personal letter from a senior US officer to his wife was discovered on a battlefield in the Ukraine on 16 May 2007. It was found in the divisional command post of the 1st Armored Division (US) that had been overrun by Russian and Ukrainian forces during a counteroffensive against NATO forces and subsequently recaptured by US troops. The letter remains as it was found – incomplete, unsigned and a lasting legacy to the careless and ill-conceived policies of the US in the post-Cold War era.

14 May 2007

My Dearest Kathy,

As I write this letter, the division is in the process of rearming, refueling and refitting after seven days of nearly continuous combat between US and Russian forces. The fighting has been fierce and the casualties on both sides are very high. Throughout the campaign, we have been accomplishing our military objectives, and our soldiers fight with great spirit and do our nation proud, yet the way ahead remains unclear. Lately, I find that I have many questions concerning our current predicament – how did we ever get to this point in space and time? And when will this conflict end? Is there a supreme purpose for our actions or is this just a war spinning out of control with no link between the violence and our national political objectives?

I write this letter today with a great sense of urgency. Despite my many questions, the horrors of war and my fatigue, I see many things more clearly than ever before. I feel driven to capture these thoughts and formulate these ideas

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while there is still time and the path is so clear. Perhaps by writing down my thoughts, I will be able to answer many of my own questions.

Despite the success that our forces are having, I continue to be troubled and find myself embroiled in an internal conflict from which there seems to be no escape. On one hand, we are doing what our country and its leaders are asking us to do. We are defending the US and our way of life. But, the path that we have taken to arrive in this God forsaken land bothers me. I question whether all of this -- the bloodshed, human suffering and destruction -- could have been prevented with a more careful management of the post-Cold War period.

You and I have faced the issue of commitment of US forces on several occasions in a very personal manner. When we spoke of committing forces, we were wrestling with my imminent deployment and the fears associated with long separations and dangers unknown. I remember well our discussions prior to my deployment to Desert Storm, talking of a noble cause, where there was a conflict between good and evil, between the liberators and the oppressor. It all seemed so easy. And we were fighting for something so real. It was easy to understand the political objectives and to translate them into military objectives that could be fought for and measured. Somehow in the last 15 years or so, we have made the leap from realism to idealism that has brought us to this current abyss that we now face. How could this have happened? How could we have lost our way?

The US has always been an idealistic nation founded on equally idealistic principles embodied in our Constitution. Throughout our history we have believed in the rights of the individual and felt strongly about defending those rights. But at the same time, we were very pragmatic in our approach to foreign affairs where

until World War II we remained largely isolationist and intervened sparingly and only when we felt our interests were at stake. While we have always championed human rights and democratic values around the world, we did not attempt to force our beliefs globally in a direct manner until after the Cold War when we declared ourselves to be the only superpower and saw seemingly endless opportunities for global engagement. Until this point, we had been willing to take the indirect and less confrontational approach in the hope that over time our ideals would prevail.

During the Cold War, we waged an ideological conflict against the Soviet Union, but were remarkably realistic in our prosecution of the conflict. On only a handful of occasions did we actually engage in open warfare, and our experiences (particularly in Vietnam) led us to search our souls and to learn the hard lessons of intervention. Our leaders of this post-Vietnam era, particularly Weinberger and Powell, gave us a “doctrine” or set of guidelines for committing forces that seemed to serve us well. The doctrine set out six tests before US combat forces should be used abroad: the engagement is vital to the national interest, the intention is to win, objectives must be clear, if objectives change, so must combat requirements, some assurance of popular and Congressional support, and the action should be a last resort.¹ I strongly believe that it was this doctrine and these sage lessons that led to the great victory in Desert Storm.

But unfortunately, I believe that we learned the wrong lessons from Desert Storm, namely that war could be made to be antiseptic and that the cost of intervention was low. These lessons led to a string of deployments of US forces

when there were either limited or no US interests – Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Ethiopia, Sudan, Afghanistan – with questionable results. Another common thread was that these conflicts were somewhere between war and peace in a difficult to define region on the spectrum of conflict that we called peace operations or Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). We found ourselves committing forces where our interests were minimal, yet for many of the parties to the conflict, survival was at stake. And as our willingness to use the indirect approach for promotion of human rights waned, we became more confrontational to include committing forces in defense of these causes. Unfortunately, through all of these deployments, we failed to internalize the concept that it is difficult to impose peace on people that are not ready for the conflict to end. Further, we failed to comprehend that military intervention in intrastate conflicts did little or nothing to address the political, economic and social roots of the strife – the employment of forces simply served to freeze psychological, emotional and geographic confrontation lines.

I am reminded of our intervention in Haiti. After introducing forces in 1994, the security situation was stabilized rapidly. However, just five years later, the CINC declared that the security situation was again degrading and was considering recommending that US forces be withdrawn. Clearly, there were significant real and personal costs associated with this intervention, but it is not as clear what, if any, long-term benefits were realized.

¹ The paraphrase of the Weinberger Criteria is from Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 318, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 35. The original criteria were set out by Secretary of Defense Weinberger in 1984.

Even when our vital interests were at stake, such as immediately following the 1998 bombings of American embassies in Africa or in Iraq concerning weapons of mass destruction capabilities, we chose to employ force in a standoff manner using ways and means that were inconsistent with the ends that we desired to achieve

I continue to think of Kosovo in this regard. How could we have possibly imagined that we could stop Serb aggression against the Kosovars or avert a humanitarian crisis using airpower alone? In this tragic case, it is clear that idealism in the absence of realism led to poor strategic planning and execution. The move from the Weinberger-Powell brand of realism to the Clinton-Albright idealism was clearly devastating to our foreign policy and ultimately to our national security and perhaps even our survival. By declaring so many areas worthy of our national attention and commitment of forces, we put at risk our ability to defend our true vital interests.

Regrettably, my overall conclusion is that our political leaders' general understanding of the use of force is extremely limited. Needless to say, this causes me great concern, especially given this current conflict. In our democracy, we have a history of civilian control of the military. However, as we have discussed many times, the political leaders' willingness to resort to the use of force – hammer diplomacy – is quite troubling. War (or the lesser forms of the use of force) represents failure. It implies that the leaders have failed to find accommodations and have resorted to violence (or the threat of violence) to achieve national objectives. The other, even worse, alternative is that war

becomes an end with no political objectives, this would imply committing forces in the absence of political direction, or simply war for war's sake

Perhaps the greatest failing in this post-Cold War era was the inability to distinguish between interests and determine which were worthy of the employment of force and which were not. The idealist approach professed by Clinton-Albright in which the decision to engage was based on if America could make a difference, then we should and must intervene became the basis for deciding whether to commit forces in the post-Cold War era.² Our foreign policy became a reactive policy of foreign action based more on CNN than on US interests and objectives. This approach to committing forces led to some unintended and dangerous consequences. Consider that on several occasions the US and Russian forces were on opposite sides of a conflict and in direct confrontation. The very showdown that had been avoided during almost 50 years of the Cold War had become a reality in this era of idealism.

At the end of the Cold War, we had an unprecedented opportunity to build a lasting global community with the Russians as strategic partners. Instead we chose to alienate them at seemingly every opportunity. Rather than asking Yeltsin to intervene with Milosevic concerning Kosovo and showing restraint regarding the use of force, we chose to draw red lines and back both the Serbs and the Russians into corners – the results were predictable. I continue to wonder if we had shown more deference to the Russians at this point in time and perhaps given them greater opportunity to alleviate the crisis, could this current war between NATO

² Actual quote from President Clinton in Detroit, MI on 22 October 1996 was "But where our interests and values are clearly at stake, and where we can make a difference, we must act and lead."

and Russia (and her allies) have been prevented? The tragedy is that we placed the Kosovo humanitarian crisis on par with US-Russian relations rather than recognizing that superpower relations were several orders of magnitude more important.

The manner in which we have “waged war” has also led to some undesirable outcomes. Our adversaries have learned how we fight and discovered our vulnerabilities. Instead of confronting our forces directly, they continue to use asymmetric means and ways to attack us and hamper our progress. The five year guerrilla war in Kosovo (and the 5,000 allied casualties) coupled with the historical anecdotes of Vietnam from over 30 years ago have given our foes a belief that they can prevail or at least, cause us to lose if they can persevere. Our failure to fully participate in World organizations – such as not paying our United Nations assessment, not agreeing to the World Court, failing to sign the landmine agreement and not gaining international authority for intervention in Kosovo – has led the international community to question the legitimacy of our actions and righteousness of our cause. Our failure to adhere to treaties such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) (and the weaponization of space) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II) have also given others cause to question our motives. To many, we have become a rogue state, not too dissimilar from the Noriega, Saddams and Milosevics from which we desire to protect the world.

Our political policies since the end of the Cold War have also had a devastating impact on our military’s ability to wage war. At the beginning of this letter, I spoke of the great spirit of our soldiers. But it takes more than great spirit to win wars. The skills and ethos that contributed to the great victories of our

nation in warfare have been blunted. The sharpness is gone from years of peacekeeping and deployments of a limited nature.

Years ago, we said that a good soldier with some specialized pre-mission training would make a good peacekeeper, however our soldiers no longer are able to be trained in the key warfighting skills that made them good soldiers. The warrior spirit is also no longer there. After years of peacekeeping and showing restraint to avoid civilian casualties, our soldiers are tentative and overly cautious even when decisive force is called for. Our force has been tamed through years of restrictive rules of engagement. We have whole generations of soldiers that are not trained for warfighting. Most of the armor battalion commanders in the division spent their early troop leading years on patrol in Bosnia at checkpoints rather than learning how to maneuver armored formations. Today, we are asking these same officers to train their platoon leaders and maneuver their battalions in high tempo war. The task seems almost insurmountable.

The quality of the force has also diminished. The recruiting challenges that began during the post-Cold War drawdown continued to degrade the force. The notion of a major peace dividend prevented the key modernization and procurement programs that could have offset the implications of a smaller force. Instead of being a smaller, more lethal force as advertised in Joint Vision 2010, the force is just smaller. Of course, we are paying for this in the blood of Americans. In our recent combat operations, a massed Russian force about twice our size nearly overwhelmed the division. Their poor tactics coupled with the learning that we have done since we have been committed allowed us to prevail. But it is worth stating that the promises of the digital battlefield have not been realized – the

outcome still comes down to the soldier on the ground moving out and taking the objective

I often question what happened to the magnificent force that won the great victory of Desert Storm. It seems so long ago since the victory in the desert ..

Perhaps this is the imperial overstretch of which Paul Kennedy spoke of in his book, The Rise and Fall of Great Powers. I think of how far we have fallen since our victories in the Cold War and Desert Storm. We have seen our global influence diminished diplomatically, economically and militarily. Predictions in 1999 that there would be no global peer competitor for 25 years have been invalidated in under eight years as both Russia and China continually challenge US interests around the globe. We are in a new Cold War with China after having alienated them concerning human rights and trade issues. China has also emerged as a regional hegemon in Asia. And of course we are in a major shooting war with an angry and resurgent Russia. And while I am just a soldier and cannot speak for all of the elements of our national power, from my perspective, the military certainly has seen a significant decrease in capabilities during my 27 years of service.

On a subject of more immediate concern, tomorrow I anticipate that we will again attack to destroy Russian forces and eliminate their capability to continue the war. I can't help but think of the soldiers that will not survive this battle. I only wish that our civilian leaders understood the horrors of war. I have to believe that if they understood, they would find another way .

Postscript:

After US forces recaptured the command post, one of the surviving soldiers from the 1st Armored Division, described the final moments before the Russian attack. The headquarters was hit with an artillery barrage and the Commanding General was killed. The General's final premonition in this letter came to fruition as the Russians employed tactical nuclear weapons in the attack that saw a 25% casualty rate for the division – over 3,500 soldiers perished.

The “General's letter” describes a scenario set in 2007 in which US and Russian forces are in conflict. The seeds of this conflict are not set in 2007, but rather in this “post” post-Cold War period. We have an unprecedented opportunity to build a better world for future generations, but we are at a pivotal point. If we are not careful, we will sow the seeds for this conflict.

Some have argued that the Weinberger-Powell doctrine is overly restrictive and reflects Cold War thinking. Perhaps, but ultra-internationalism embodied in the Clinton-Albright doctrine is problematic as well. Could it be the time to develop a realistic doctrine for US foreign policy that captures the idealist spirit on which this country was founded?