

Interservice Competition:

Air Force F-16.



U.S. Air Force (Shonna Ridings)

The Solution, Not the Problem

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We do not know what the future holds. Although our Nation is vastly stronger today than at any time in the past, we are likely to face major challenges. But we do not know how or when. To deter such challenges and respond effectively if aggression does occur, the Armed Forces need a policy planning system to identify and correct weaknesses in our security as they develop.

Intuitively we know the sort of planning to do. Americans prefer a free market system to controlled markets, competition to monopoly. We believe in competitive elections rather than one-party rule. And when an international security crisis befalls us, we never have the will to suppress competitive urges among the services—the same urges usually labelled wasteful duplication when the threat is not so obvious. Recall that

three commands fought independently and successfully in the Pacific during World War II. And because three services developed ballistic missiles, we were able to meet the Soviet challenge of the 1950s rapidly and effectively.

Interservice competition offers civilians several major advantages. First, it helps generate vital information. What the Navy won't tell us about its vulnerabilities, the Army and Air Force might. Are aircraft carriers easy to attack? Should an upgraded Aegis system form the heart of our theater ballistic missile defense? Can naval forces stationed off a coast exert significant influence in an evolving crisis? Ask the Navy; but ask the Army and Air Force as well.

Second, it gives civilians leverage in their effort to control defense policy. It is extremely difficult to face down a unified military. Ranks of generals and admirals who are in agreement on the same issue position are a formidable force to out-

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maneuver in any Washington policy debate. Interservice competition gives civilians the possibility of informed and powerful military allies in defense strategy and budget discussions. It allows them to play one service against another when particular policies are preferred. If the Army begins to complain about peace operations which the Clinton administration appears to favor, perhaps the Marine Corps will sign up to conduct them.

Third, competition spurs innovation. When there is expectation of significant reward or loss, the services may offer up not only information about their bureaucratic rivals but new ideas, ways of both improving their military capabilities and protecting their roles and missions. It was the Navy's fear of losing the nuclear deterrent mission entirely to the Air Force in the 1950s that gave us the Polaris submarine that in turn reduced the need to deploy hundreds of vulnerable and costly strategic bombers and most of the liquid fueled missiles that the Air Force was developing.

The benefits of competition are not always grasped. As one recent analysis of innovation theories points out, the Navy chose not to challenge Air Force plans to field either new bombers or highly accurate—but difficult to base—MX ballistic missiles in the early 1980s even though it was developing an equally capable missile system for its submarine force. Similarly, the Marine Corps decided after a brief fight not to oppose Army plans for prepositioned ships laden with equipment for mid-level contingencies even though this fleet largely duplicates capabilities the

Marines already have and intend to expand. Billions could have been saved in each instance if the public had been made aware of the overlap and advantages of one alternative over the other.

The problem, of course, is that competitors don't like to compete. They prefer to collude, to work together for mutual benefit. Antitrust laws only protect us from collusion among business firms to the extent they are enforced. There is, however, no similar shield against collusion among nonprofit organizations and government agencies. "Give the United Way" really means "Give the Charity Cartel Way" as charities collude to prevent performance comparisons and any expression of donor choice. The Armed Forces, which became sensitive to being manipulated at the hands of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, have now become the champion of jointness, their shield against being played off against one another by civilians. Joint approval means all the tradeoffs are made on the friendliest possible terms under which each service threatens retaliation if its most important needs are not considered.

But the Armed Forces may overestimate the willingness of civilians to foment competition. Interservice friction produces a lot of political heat because it usually involves appeals to Congress and recruitment of partisan supporters among military retirees, contractors, and friendly reporters. The resulting turmoil often reflects badly on civilian officials, leaving a public impression that they fail to manage effectively. This is particularly true when accusations are made over the duplication of capabilities, which adds to the general perception of waste in government; but it also extends to criticism by one service of another. Too many inside and outside of government confuse audible debate over policy alternatives with indecisiveness when it should be seen as the necessary prelude to informed political judgment.

Our four air forces, three armies, two strategic missile forces, and one and a half navies are indeed wasteful luxuries if they are not harnessed to generate policy options and comparisons. In an uncertain world it is better to have multiple perspectives on defense issues, but how can this be achieved short of a major crisis? Congress was once thought to be the champion of the competitive approach but instead enacted the Goldwater-Nichols reforms, the 1986 blueprint for jointness now so warmly endorsed by defense officials and senior officers as their shield against public scrutiny. Apparently, the potential for serious oversight that a competitive structure might require was too exhausting for Congress to contemplate, absorbed as most members have become by ideology and the quest for reelection, and it sought to stamp it out. How then can a competitive defense system be maintained?



Navy F-14.

Marine AV-8B.

2nd Marine Division, Combat Camera (B.E. Van Cise)

U.S. Navy (Stephen Battiz)

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Fiscal austerity fortunately works in favor of increased competition. The social entitlement battle in the face of the deficit reduction effort is bound to draw attention to the fact that defense expenditures in real terms have yet to fall below their Cold War lows despite the fact that neither the Soviet Union nor the Warsaw Pact still exist. Collusion functions best when hard choices can be evaded. Logrolling will stop when one of the services discovers that its vital interests are being jeopardized by the need for further reductions.

Luckily, the services have not entirely lost their identities although some promoters of jointness wish they had. Relatively simple and inexpensive features such as separate academies, distinctive uniforms, and unique military traditions maintain public support for the Armed Forces. More important, each has a service staff, an affiliated civilian secretariat within its department, and continuing attachments to particular

weapons that provide a power base from which to develop and promote alternatives.

The services potentially offer us the conditions that Sanford Weiner has identified as crucial for effective competition—a set of relatively secure organizations that can be made to feel uncertain about their future—“constrained autonomy.” Organizations threatened by immediate demise cannot function. Their strength to plan is diminished by the need of their employees to find jobs. Conversely, totally secure organizations are subject to the lethargy of tenure where the creative idea is a rarity and the urge to action is difficult to arouse. Pushed to worry about their futures but not slated for quick disbandment, the services would have the resources, time, and need to think hard about their special talents and contributions to national security.

Competition is not its own reward. The services will be reluctant to provoke one another even on the promise of specific benefits such as budgetary increases or the preservation of favored assets. The risks of significant losses are high for all once the war among them resumes. And the services are not alone in fearing competition. Defense civilians have not shown interest in forcing



McDonnell Douglas

Army AH-64A.

a competitive search for savings or new insights. Witness their recent recommendation to purchase the full complement of C-17 transports when a buy of off-the-shelf Boeing 747s would do nearly as well at \$6 to \$8 billion less. Congress also seems uninterested, believing that the operational unity mandated by Goldwater-Nichols gave us victory in the Persian Gulf despite the contradictory strategies which the services actually pursued. Moreover members of Congress, deficit reduction pledges notwithstanding, are seeking increases in defense spending to keep the orders flowing for their favorite weapons or contractors. President Clinton is not likely to push the issue, having worked hard to gain the support of the military after early missteps.

The unintentional initiator of the next wave of interservice competition may well be average middle class citizens, who we know from opinion surveys want taxes cut, their parents' Medicare and Social Security benefits preserved, their police, schools, environment, and recreational areas maintained, and welfare—foreign and domestic—drastically cut. To get their vote, politicians may

have to forfeit defense. Ships may have to be tied up, troops called home, and planes grounded.

But this sacrifice in military readiness will not be totally in vain. With fewer dollars and more friction, the services will have to think harder about the threat and how the Armed Forces can meet it. There is no better incentive to candor, error correction, and creativity in defense planning than a tight budget and a few smart rivals competing for a share of the pie. **JFQ**

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