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Needed: The Right Equipment

Sophisticated Craft Have No Place in Low-Intensity Conflicts

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The United States is contending with more than 30 small wars worldwide, and they are causing some military "experts" to begin developing a strategy to deal with these low-intensity conflicts.

However, there is a void in low-intensity conflict capability in the equipment area. This is particularly noted in the ability to provide fixed-wing close air support, still one of the most neglected elements of the U.S. defense/military arsenal.

Levels of violence decrease, not only when the correct tactics are used, but when the right equipment is applied in conjunction with these tactics. For instance, the antiquated AC-47 in El Salvador armed with three .50-caliber machine guns lowered the casualties on both sides. The mere presence of such an airplane makes it difficult and dangerous for guerrilla forces to amass for attack, and when armed violence decreases, it becomes possible to settle the political, social and economic concerns of the conflict.

What type of aircraft would be suitable for a modern-day U.S. defense force? The ground commander of a small unit engaged in a search for guerrillas needs an aircraft that can be on station with him at the beginning of the operation and can loiter there for an extended period in day or night. An aircraft that can fly low enough and slow enough to be able to see small targets on the ground and keep them in sight while maneuvering is needed. Furthermore, the ground commander must have those targets destroyed with the weapons it has aboard (probably a side-firing gun that allows orbiting vs. strafing). It is neither necessary nor desirable that the aircraft be capable of delivering large quantities of expensive laser-guided or other types of highly destructive area weapons; "surgical" response is preferable, using the minimum force required.

Low-intensity conflicts involve political, economic and social/social justice considerations that are as important as the military power that can be brought to bear on either side. The weapons used, therefore, should keep in mind these other aspects as well as the military considerations of a conflict, by being the right combination of force. As Richard Nixon states in his latest book, *No More Vietnams*, "Armies must be equipped and trained to meet the threat they are facing. Money could be spent in a far better way than in having a country like El Salvador equip itself with high-performance fighter aircraft for use against guerrillas who have no air force." Furthermore, it is almost always politically preferable that nationals of the country involved be the actual combatants, keeping U.S. personnel in low-profile, advisory roles where possible. A counterinsurgency (COIN) aircraft should, therefore, be combat capable when flown by pilots, and maintained by mechanics who are likely to have limited educational and skill levels.

Having an aircraft with such limited performace would lower construction cost to less than $250,000 per copy. Construction would take advantage of current technology using fiberglass, Kevlar and composite materials instead of strategic materials and expensive high-tech metal alloys. There would be no need to carry sophisticated electronic equipment or radar; instead, only radios, short-range navigation equipment and certain types of warning devices would be carried. The aircraft would be propeller-driven, with a top speed of about 300 miles per hour and would take off on unimproved grass airfields.

While helicopters have many of the above capabilities and have been used successfully in combat, they are unsuitable for COIN use for several reasons. Helicopters are expensive. The small AH-1 Cobra cost $4.8 million in 1983, and the newer AH-64 Apache cost $8.4 million in 1986. They are complex and require highly skilled pilots and maintenance personnel to keep flying. They have proven too expensive for some levels of risk, routine in low-intensity conflicts.

For years, the tendency in all branches of the U.S. military has been toward faster, more sophisticated, more capable and more expensive aircraft. These are the weapons needed in a major conventional or nuclear war that will never be fought. Their development is encouraged by the defense industry that builds them. The employment of such high-speed, heavily armed aircraft, with only a short loiter time over the target, proved partially successful for the United States in Vietnam. The Soviets are experiencing similar results in Afghanistan. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were able to destroy buildings and large troop concentrations, where they could be found, but neither had much luck dealing with small groups of 200 or less lightly armed and very mobile guerrillas.

An aircraft to deal with this void would be very popular with the governments of countries whose armies need close air support capability, but cannot afford and do not need current U.S. front-line aircraft. The defense industry should realize that these planes would be a popular export item and would provide jobs.

It is imperative that the United States develop and build an inexpensive aircraft that can provide close air support in low-intensity conflicts. This aircraft may be seen as a step backward in terms of capabilities and technology but clearly will be a step forward in understanding the future combat arenas in which U.S. interests must be protected.

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Harry Summers

Gen. Rogers vs. Reagan: A Crisis of Conscience

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Shortly before relinquishing his post to Gen. John Galvin on June 25, then-NATO Commander Gen. Bernard Rogers publicly criticized the Reagan administration's rush for the so-called "zero-zero option" arms agreement on intermediate nuclear forces in Europe.

"What is more important, political credibility or the credibility of deterrence?" he asked. "Let's not sacrifice the long-term security of Western Europe on the altar of political expediency."

These were strong words from an unlikely source. If any general could have been expected to bite his tongue before expressing public disagreement with political policy, it was Rogers. Ten years earlier as Army chief of staff during the Carter administration, Rogers himself had admonished Maj. Gen. John Singlaub — most recently of Iran-contra hearings notoriety — for doing precisely the same thing.

Singlaub, then serving in Korea, had taken public issue with President Carter's dim-witted decision to pull all American ground forces out of Korea. Although Carter's decision was reversed when allies and adversaries alike warned that such a move would destabilize Northeast Asia, Singlaub was relieved from his command and retired from active duty.

In a message to all Army general officers, Rogers reminded them that "Traditionally, military officers have not only the right but the responsibility to give their honest and candid opinions and recommendations during the planning and discussion phase leading to a decision." "However," he went on to say, "once a decision has been made, we then have the responsibility to give our wholehearted support to that decision."

"What changes at the time of decision is not the opinion but the public voicing of that opinion," Rogers said. "If asked, intellectual honesty demands that frank views be privately expressed. But loyalty and fidelity also demand that full support for the decision be expressed at the same time. The last thing that should be done is to carry any arguments and disagreements to the public media."

Why then did Rogers disregard his own admonitions and go public with his disagreement on arms control? Cynics would say it was bitterness over his forced retirement from active duty. But no one who knows Rogers would buy such an explanation.

Napoleon Bonaparte had a better explanation: "A [military] commander in chief cannot take as an excuse for his mistakes . . . an order given by his sovereign or minister, when the person giving the order is absent from the field of operations and is imperfectly aware or wholly unaware of the latest state of affairs. It follows that any commander in chief who undertakes to carry out a plan he considers defective is at fault; he must put forward his reasons, insist on the plan being changed and finally tender his resignation rather than be the instrument of his army's downfall."

Rogers knows that during the Vietnam War failure by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and by senior commanders in the field to follow that advice led to one of the greatest disasters in our history.

With the hasty and ill-conceived arms control proposals made at the Reykjavik summit as evidence that the White House is dominated by imagemakers rather than strategists, and with the Iran contra hearings as further evidence that the administration's decisionmaking process is almost unbelievably inept, Rogers has good reason for concern.

He thus faced a crisis of conscience. On the one hand was his pledge of loyalty to the president in his role as commander in chief; on the other was his solemn oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States — i.e., to the security and well-being of the American people.

Believing strongly that the withdrawal of intermediate nuclear weapons from Europe would jeopardize the survival of the nation, duty required that the oath to the Constitution take precedence, a decision surely not made lightly.

Rogers' disagreement does not make him right. But it does serve as a warning that arms control is not a political play thing. The real test for the so-called zero-zero option is not whether agreement can be reached, but whether such an agreement will enhance, rather than degrade, the security of the United States and its allies.

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