



## Stand To

A couple of months ago, a private, semi-authoritative newspaper that often supplements official news channels ran an op-ed piece that bothered me. The columnist derided the choice of the First Armored Division as the main combat unit for our component of the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR). He said that it was the wrong force for the job; it was too heavy. The implications of that piece still upset me months later. Why? It is another tired addition to that flabby body of military analysis that periodically picks its head up out of the sand and says that tanks, and heavy operations in general, are dead. These analysts are often the same guys who still think the news media lost Vietnam, that the USAF destroyed all of Iraq's tanks, and that the force structure can never have too many special forces. This brand of military soothsaying unsettles me; I refuse to buy into it, and more importantly, I'm certain that some of our future adversaries won't have subscribed either. I urge you to resist this, and any other attack, on heavy units.

In nearly every conflict where our leaders have committed ground forces larger than a Special Forces "A" Team, armor has been a consideration, and sometimes even used. Recall those few, ancient, yet still trustworthy, M551 Sheridans snuck so cleverly into Panama in C-5 Galaxy bellies, satisfyingly seen blasting to the underworld parts of the corrupt dictator's command structure. How can we forget the too-late introduction of a heavy force into the Somalia mission, or the debate on whether to deploy it or not, a debate that some say helped bring down the SECDEF? Veterans of that deployment suggest that life improved — i.e., became safer — after the introduction of the armored task force. Of course, Desert Storm and Desert Shield were operations we had trained for at the National Training Center and during many home station training events. They were naturally heavy affairs.

Does anyone think that potential future hot spots won't have tanks involved? Yes, much of Korea is heavily urbanized, but we expect those M1A1s to figure heavily into our assured success in any future conflict there. Southwest Asia is still a cauldron of seething, centuries-old emotions where lots of well armed people still have imagined scores to settle. Our successes in 1991 demonstrated the relevance of tanks in that environment quite ably.

There are few substitutes for the many positive qualities a tank brings to your side of an argument. That gets me closer to the Bosnian situation. Yes, the road net above the valley floors is not impressive, and yes, tanks that weigh nearly 70 tons will tear them to pieces, earning the ire of the farmers and townspeople we are there helping to make safer. But send no tanks initially? Don't I hear the ghosts of policymakers for Somalia and Vietnam still advising that there is no viable armored threat, or that there is no trafficable terrain in those places as well? Hindsight shows that those people were thinking "in the box," and that they missed the value that armor was to play and should have played if used early.

Isn't a large part of the Bosnian mission one of deterring once bitter-foes from reigniting the hatreds that saw them kill their neighbors, and if that deterrence should fail, convince them to separate with whatever force needs applying, all the while minimizing our own casualties? That sounds like a job an armored task force can accomplish well. There is a reason why people — soldiers and civilians alike — stop to watch columns of Abrams and Bradleys roll by; they are awesome, fear-evoking monsters. Big machines. Lots of big guns. World-class soldiers and world-class reputations. That is why you send an armored division to Bosnia, not an airmobile one, and not a light one. I can't imagine that Mom and Dad want us to take their sons into danger without overpowering force if it's available. Force protection isn't some lip service buzzword that commanders gurgle out during their risk assessments. Our tanks offer a lot of force protection for their crews and for everyone else in the force. It is a whole lot easier to dial down your force and make it lighter as conditions improve than to piecemeal the force in a reactive mode.

The next time you read a column or hear an interview by some self-appointed military expert who foresees the end of armor and heavy operations, call the guy to task. We know him to be wrong. Life is a whole lot different looking across the DMZ or through a gunner's primary sight than through a Beltway office window.

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