

Tanks and the Korean War: A Case Study in Unpreparedness

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"I believe we need to read the lessons closely lest we repeat, at inestimable cost, the mistakes for which we paid so dear a price."

General Matthew B. Ridgway
The Korean War (1967)

As the U.S. Army went to war in Korea in June 1950, it once again found itself unprepared to fight and win the first and succeeding battles.¹ In order to understand why the Army was unprepared, we must examine the postwar development of doctrine regarding mechanized warfare with tanks as the main maneuver element.

On the eve of the Korean War, the nation's defense establishment had set aside much of what had been learned about the conventional combined arms armor doctrine so successfully demonstrated in Western Europe in World War II, and instead had begun to depend on nuclear weapons delivered by air power. As this was happening, the Army was digesting the war's lessons, attempting significant changes in organizations, weapons systems development, and doctrine, based on the success of the combined arms approach developed during the war.

It was quite evident that the tank had revolutionized battlefield dynamics. The armored force that swept across Europe had learned some important lessons, chiefly that it was essential for ground forces and tactical air to fight in combination, and that tanks could not operate independently in battle. Another lesson was that it was important to have tank units organic to infantry divisions, and consequently, a tank battalion was made organic to each infantry division to assist in the assault.² Armor was expected to exploit the breakthrough, then strike out to pursue the enemy. In short, the Army believed that the combined arms team, built around the tank, could make operational level exploitation possible.

One doctrinal milestone emerged in January 1946, with the "Report of the



Although the U.S. had developed more modern tanks, the WWII-era Sherman M4A3E8s carried the burden of much of the fighting early in the Korean War.

War Department Equipment Board," the Stilwell Board, which was named after its president, the respected General Joseph W. Stilwell. Based on immediate postwar reports from Europe on tactical employment of armored and infantry divisions, one of its many recommendations called for establishment of a combined arms force to conduct extended service tests of new weapons and equipment. The board suggested that this proposed combined arms force formulate a doctrine for its employment, specifically aimed at providing a ready force quickly available for any military contingency.

The report proposed three types of tanks: a light tank for reconnaissance and security; a medium tank capable of assault action, exploitation, and pursuit; and a heavy tank capable of assault action and breakthrough. The board also recognized the importance of developing components specifically for tanks rather than relying, as in the past, on standard automotive components. It was now accepted that the tank was a special vehicle. Finally, the board based its recommendations on the idea that the next war would again be total, with the use of air power and atomic weapons, and that victory could only be

achieved by occupying the enemy's territory.³

Based on another recommendation of the Stilwell Board, the commander of the Army Ground Forces, General Jacob L. Devers, disbanded the tank destroyer branch. Tank destroyer doctrine was no more than an early World War II defensive response to the threat of mechanized warfare and its main ground maneuver element, the tank. But as the war progressed, tanks improved and accounted for most of the tank-on-tank combat. By the end of the war, the M26 Pershing tank offered better armor protection than the open-turreted tank destroyers and mounted a 90mm gun as good or better than the guns on the TDs.⁴

As the Army was steeply down-sizing, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement the Stilwell Board's recommendations. The cuts were so drastic that during his tour as Army Chief of Staff, between November 1945 and February 1948, General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower remarked that implementing the rapid demobilization of the wartime army was more unpleasant than being head of the occupation forces in Germany. His tenure as Chief

of Staff, Eisenhower noted, was full of frustrations. The wartime Army was falling apart, rather than demobilizing, while he was struggling with Congress over budgetary problems and the public outcry to “bring the boys home.” Adding to this dilemma, troop discontent over inequities in demobilization almost turned into a mutiny. Eisenhower struggled with the need to redeploy the Army for occupation duties in Germany, Austria, Japan, and Korea, and there was an ongoing debate over the unification of the military services.⁵

Speaking on national security at the Nebraska Fair in Lincoln on August 31, 1947, General Devers observed that during the two years after the end of hostilities in Europe and the Pacific, the United States demobilized the Army and Navy, “until it became evident that, with every reduction in the power at our disposal, there was a corresponding deterioration in the international situation.”⁶ Even before the war had ended in Europe, the Secretary of State advised the War Department of serious deterioration of relations with the Soviet Union. A year later, Secretary of State James Byrnes had painted a very pessimistic picture regarding Soviet aggressive tendencies in Eastern Europe.⁷ These developments made the international situation more unstable, yet the President was implementing a defense policy based on deep cuts in conventional military expenditures in favor of reliance on nuclear power delivered by air.

General Devers reacted with criticism of the nation’s policy makers. He claimed they had missed opportunities to educate the public about world problems. Regarding the future Army, he said he was disappointed that Congress was resisting the President’s and War Department’s plan for universal military training, which was necessary to fill the ranks of the National Guard and Organized Reserves. Devers argued that since the bulk of the Regular Army was on occupation duty and garrisoning United States territories, there would be a major manpower problem if a war occurred.⁸ Two years later, the Army would be stretched even further by the need to assign ground troops to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which — along with the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan — were part of the nation’s new policy of containing Soviet expansionism.

When the economy-minded Republicans gained control of both houses in Congress in the 1946 elections, the

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Army’s future became even more vague. Senator Robert A. Taft, an influential Republican isolationist, challenged the country’s postwar role in internationalism, and was a proponent of limited government. The Ohio senator was not enthusiastic about committing U.S. ground forces in Europe. Instead he supported the Navy and a policy of reliance on air power and nuclear weapons for national defense.⁹

Adding to the Army’s predicament was the influence of atomic bomb scientist and author Vannevar Bush, who was head of the Office of Scientific Research and Development during World War II, and beginning in September 1947, the director of the Joint Research and Development Board, created to resolve technological differences between the several departments and agencies in the military establishment. Earlier he had suggested to Congress that the military limit its work to improvements in existing equipment rather than perusing technological development. Shortly before the war started in Korea, Bush wrote the Army Chief of Staff, General Omar N. Bradley, that the day of the tank’s dominance was fading. He argued that for the cost of one tank, 100 antitank guns could be built, using new ammunition to fight and hold defensive lines in Europe against a preponderance of Soviet tanks.¹⁰

Throughout this period Congress tenaciously held to its illusion of insular security despite growing Soviet intransigence and aggressiveness. By controlling the purse, Congress was able to influence a national strategic policy, limiting military force levels and weapon systems development programs. The Army suffered the most under the fiscal restraints of the legislative branch, having its appropriations, especially for research and development, cut each year until the war broke out in Korea. Before he left office in February 1948, General Eisenhower warned that the unbalanced budget situation had rendered the Army increasingly unable to mobilize in a national emergency. The

outgoing Army Chief of Staff stated that the Army had in essence purchased no new equipment, including tanks, since World War II. Therefore the Army, he warned, was in no situation to train and arm its troops adequately to meet demands of emerging international threats. Consequently, the ground forces reported state of readiness to deal with contingencies and defensive plans were nothing but “mere scraps of paper,” Eisenhower concluded.¹¹

Military manpower continued to decline, not for a lack of volunteers, but due to Army budget cuts. Despite an increasingly turbulent new world order, the home front was more preoccupied with its move to suburbia, concern over rising prices and inflation, labor unrest, a crisis in education, housing shortages, and tax disputes. Meanwhile, the National Defense Act of 1947 had separated the Air Force from the Army, giving it equal status with the Army and Navy. The new Defense Department establishment, under a civilian head with cabinet status, was intended to improve wartime operations of the services, but instead politicized the process, making it difficult to establish centralized planning due to multiservice bickering and squabbling amongst the service chiefs. This increased the competition for military technology funding during a period of budget constraints.

With the technologically driven air power proponents striving to achieve a greater nuclear delivery capability and the Navy, traditionally the most expensive of the military services, fighting for its share, there were virtually no funds for armor research and development. This weakened the Army’s political situation, depriving the ground forces of the means to develop a proper relationship between the doctrine and technology required for mechanized warfighting as envisioned by the Stowell Board.

The Truman Administration, continually driven by domestic policies that focused more on the postwar economy and social programs, remained adamant about defense cuts. In 1948, the Army had to impose an 80 percent reduction in equipment requirements, thus deferring any equipment modernization. In 1948, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted a \$30 billion defense budget based on their perceptions of national security needs, Truman capped their budget at the \$14.4 billion set in 1947 and progressively reduced in succeeding fiscal years until January 1950,

when it was reduced again to \$13.5 billion. Congress also reduced the authorized Army end-strength from 677,000 to 630,000. When North Korea invaded South Korea, the U.S. Army's actual strength was only about 591,000 men. And only 6,000 serviceable tanks remained in 1950 of the more than 28,000 tanks the country had at the end of World War II.¹²

Although President Truman blamed rapid post-World War II demobilization of America's mighty military force on the people, the press, and Congress, he also went to great lengths to hold down defense spending.¹³ Truman's ambitious Secretary of Defense, Louis Johnson, whose economy drive on the eve of the Korean War again fell heavily on the Army, best illustrated this. Johnson believed that the best national defense policy rested on nuclear air power. Unlike Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Acheson favored a more flexible policy based on deployable military power that would enhance American diplomacy. This policy found support in a recommendation made shortly before the invasion of South Korea in a secret National Security Council study (NSC-68), which called for a stronger ground force to deal with increasing challenges caused by the spread of communism worldwide.¹⁴

Secretary Acheson, however, defined the country's strategic defensive perimeter along a line that included Japan and Taiwan but did not include Korea, a country where the Joint Chiefs of Staff had earlier advised the President that the United States had little strategic interest. They argued that military retrenchment and budget cuts forced them to take U.S. military forces out of Korea.¹⁵ At the same time, there was disagreement between the Central Intelligence Agency and Army Intelligence over the possible outcome. The CIA advised that withdrawal of U.S. ground troops from South Korea in the spring of 1949 would in time be followed by an invasion from the North. The Army's Intelligence Division disagreed, claiming troop withdrawal would not encourage a North Korean move.¹⁶

Meanwhile, early in 1949, an advisory panel on armor reported that the U.S. Army had no tanks in production or in development capable of defeating the types possessed by the country's potential enemies. The panel considered this situation critical. Unless the Army's tank development situation was improved, the panel reported, the United States would not have enough tanks to

support a major ground war for at least two and a half years after the beginning of hostilities. One solution suggested was to take advantage of America's great industrial capabilities and the mechanical aptitudes of its people.¹⁷

A 1949 field manual emphasized the importance of the offensive role of armor, noting that the faster armor moves and the quicker it accomplishes its offensive mission of penetration and envelopment, the fewer the losses and more effective the gains. Exploitation was considered a continuation of penetration and envelopment. Tankers were expected to plan boldly and execute their missions with aggressiveness and violence, employing firepower, mobility, and speed.¹⁸

In March 1950, the Hodge Report — named after Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, the post-World War II Army corps commander in Korea — stated that armor was more effective when employed as part of the combined arms team of tank, infantry, artillery, combat engineers, and tactical air power. Armor's mission with the combined arms team was destruction of enemy forces with firepower, mobility, and shock action. The report added that attacking towards deep objectives in pursuit and exploitation over considerable distances was the role for armor at the operational level. In the design of tanks, the report stated, firepower, maneuverability, and mobility were more important than armor protection, although armor remained important. Like the Stilwell Board, it recommended tanks be organic to infantry regiments and divisions, and that three types of functional tanks be developed. Disheartened, the Hodge Report noted that Army research and development had been curtailed and would likely be further reduced.¹⁹

By 1950, Army doctrine had been revised in many ways; however, it was basically a refinement of World War II experience. It was Eurocentric, designed to fight a total war, rather than contingency operations in present and future less-than-total war situations around the world.²⁰ Congressional and White House actions had reduced nine of 10 Army divisions into ineffective skeletons, impacting training. This was especially true of the four occupation divisions stationed in Japan. That congested country and its road conditions did not permit extensive training exercises, especially for medium and heavy tanks. Moreover, because of the military austerity program, these divisions

were deficient in authorized tank strength. Rather than having a standard complement of one heavy tank battalion of M26s and three regimental medium tank companies of M4s, each division had only one company of M24 Chaffee light tanks, no match for the Soviet-built T34/85 tanks that the North Koreans Peoples' Army used to spearhead their invasion of South Korea.

On the eve of the Korean War, the Army had approximately 3,400 M24 light tanks in the inventory, most of them unserviceable. In addition, there were available approximately 3,200 M4A3E8 Sherman medium tanks of World War II vintage, of which only a few more than half were serviceable.²¹ The M4 mediums were the workhorse of U.S. ground troops during World War II. They were not tactically capable of head-to-head engagement with German tanks. Their battlefield success was due more to superior numbers and the ability of U.S. tankers to maneuver to a position where a penetrating round could find a weak spot.²² To engage superior German tanks, the Army introduced, late in the war, the heavier armed and armored M26 Pershing. However, the first three M26s that were rushed to Korea from the Tokyo Ordnance Depot had chronic problems, especially overheating engines and defective fan belts.²³

Also introduced to Korea was the M46 Patton. Fielded in 1949, the M46 was an M26 upgraded in engine reliability and cooling. Accordingly, tankers went to war in Korea with equipment mostly left over from World War II. In addition, many tankers were ill-trained and ill-prepared, receiving equipment just days before engaging the T34/85s.²⁴

In the beginning, the Korean War was a war of movement. U.S. tank units were assigned to various infantry divisions, regimental combat teams, and task forces for mobile fire support and antitank capabilities. No large armor units — regiments, brigades or divisions — saw service in Korea. After the counter-invasion by the Chinese Communist forces and what was left of the North Korean People's Army, the conflict became a defensive war of attrition and increased firepower to support infantry forces. Despite mountainous terrain and restricted trafficability, tanks proved to be potent adjuncts in support of infantry. Often they were used for indirect fire missions or deployed in fixed defensive positions. Though most armor action was infan-



At top of page, M46 tanks of the 64th Tank Battalion undergo final inspection before an operation supporting the 3rd ID in July, 1951. At left, an M46 rolls down one of country's few high-speed roads. The M-46 at lower right slowly moves into a village. The knocked-out North Korean vehicle at center, above, is a 76mm self-propelled field gun.

try- and artillery-driven, Korea demonstrated the value of tanks as infantry-accompanying weapons, and on occasion, achieved spectacular results in executing fairly deep mechanized task force operations despite mountainous terrain and trafficability restrictions.²⁵

A 1954 Johns Hopkins study, "Tank-vs-Tank Combat in Korea," recorded that U.S. tanks were approximately three times as effective as enemy tanks. It noted that American tanks destroyed about 25 percent of the enemy tank force, largely due to higher first-round engagements and hits.²⁶ As a result of early experiences in Korea, a 1951 policy conference on armor revived the Stilwell Board's recommendations for three types of functional tanks: a light gun tank distinguished by its mobility; a medium tank characterized by its ability to sustain itself in all types of combat action; and a heavy tank to defeat any enemy on the battlefield.²⁷ Conversely, the British, who considered the Patton tank "all too pansy," had indicated that, unlike the U.S. Army, one all-purpose tank, like their Centurion, was more suitable for armor operations.²⁸

In spite of various armor policy recommendations following the Stilwell Board Report, battlefield dynamics in a

limited war changed the relationship between maneuver and firepower, emphasizing increased use of air power and artillery.

At the 1954 Armor Conference, the question of armor mobility was positioned within the national strategy of nuclear air power. It rationalized that mobility and flexibility would become more decisive on a nuclear battlefield. The conference concluded that armor was more capable of attaining relatively superior mobility that could provide a decisive advantage in a European-style battle. The conference accepted the concept of firepower and attrition but suggested it be integrated with the freedom of action that armor provided.²⁹ Naturally, mobility depended upon equipment characteristics, which required a trade-off between mobility and survivability. Summarizing, the conference noted that firepower was the decisive factor, and that armor doctrine be based on the fundamental concept that power coupled with an unexcelled ability to maneuver firepower at the decisive time to the decisive place. Yet for the decades following the Korean War, firepower systems and attrition warfare doctrine dominated. This doctrine finally gave way to the visionary AirLand Battle doctrine

for warfighting at the operational level that characterized Allied operations during the Gulf War.³⁰

Concluding, there are a number of historical observations to consider. First are the country's political objectives. Until the war in Korea, Congress and the President were more prone to political and economic containment of the Soviet Union and collective security through the United Nations rather than promoting a combat-ready ground force to deal with contingencies, as suggested by the Stilwell board.

This situation again demonstrated that the country's leadership failed to adopt a national defense policy that took advantage of technological changes brought about as a result of World War II. Congress and the President also lacked the vision to fully understand the importance of the conventional component of a national military policy. The outcome was that traditional military heritage once again came in conflict with postwar domestic and political demands, causing a serious gap between foreign policy and a suitable military policy.

The second observation deals with the issue of military strategy, which is how to win the next war. The post-World



The Sherman “Easy-8” was outclassed in tank-to-tank combat by the early ’50s, but was still formidable in its main Korean War role, supporting infantry. This scene shows an M4 accompanying U.S. and Korean infantrymen through a rubble-strewn street.

War II military austerity invoked by the White House and Congress had a ripple effect, stifling Army research and development necessary for innovation with a mobile strike force trained and equipped to fight and win the first and succeeding battles.

The Army’s post-war doctrine on how to organize and fight its next war was not in agreement with required modern equipment assets necessary to execute its mission. Consequently, the strategic, operational, and tactical links for winning the first battle never materialized. This was due to a national strategy that did not take into consideration the relationship between threats and the need for technological advances. As a result, the Army had a force structure and equipment that did not fit its future warfighting doctrine that became outmoded in spite of the Stilwell Board’s recommendations. Instead the national defense strategy of the country relied on nuclear weapons and intercontinental airpower capabilities and the exercise of coercion called deterrence, America’s Maginot Line.

Third, when the U.S. Army entered the Korean War, an innovative tank program and a visionary mobile combined arms doctrine — suggested by the Stilwell Board and endorsed by the Hodge Report — were all but forgotten.

As revolutionary as the tank was in World War II, its future full potential was not to be realized with a ground force whose mission began to change as a result of America’s expanding international commitments to contain communism. As a result of the Army’s lack of preparedness, North Korean forces, led by their T-34/85s, pushed the allies back to the Pusan Perimeter, a tiny sliver of the peninsula, before it could accumulate sufficient strength to stop the North Koreans and launch a counteroffensive.

The neglect of armor research and development and a makeshift organization led to many frustrations for tankers in Korea, who fought and died there while employing, in most cases, worn-out, World War II equipment. This

experience was a clear example of the importance of readiness and the need to modernize organization, training, and equipment to deal with the ever-changing threats and technical advances of warfighting.

Unfortunately, funds that did trickle down for armor research and development degraded the health of the armor force, a legacy that continued long after the “Forgotten War” in spite of the changes in warfighting from a World War II concept of total war to the dynamics of a limited war.

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Notes

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