

ARMY GREEN

BY STEWART BRAND



THE ARMS RACE is running backwards. NATO is without a mission. The few Communist governments that haven't crumbled have turned inward. In the absence of a Soviet-scale threat, present or foreseeable, what is the US Defense Department supposed to defend in the coming decades? What are we supposed to do with the prodigious instrument that won the Cold War and encored with a dazzling victory in the Gulf? That is the deeper debate these days around the Pentagon, accompanying the immediate issue of how to scale down severely and gracefully.

Meanwhile a famous global problem, the deteriorating natural environment, is gradually being re-understood in economic terms. America is finally becoming alarmed about the decay of its engineered infrastructure — highways, water systems, communications systems, and even the education system. In the same way, the whole world is worried about the *natural* infrastructure — soils, aquifers, fishable waters, forests, biodiversity, and even the atmosphere. The natural systems are priceless in value and nearly impossible to replace, but they're cheap to maintain. All you have to do is defend them.

The natural and engineered infrastructures together constitute the world's economic infrastructure — the ecostructure.

Suppose our military took on the long-term role of protecting the global ecostructure. From one point of view it did so in the Persian Gulf, defending the world's access to the major source of inexpensive energy when US direct interests in the region were relatively limited. Could we build on that success? When the global economic infrastructure is understood as including natural infrastructure, we might defend rain forests and diverse ecosystems for the same reasons we defend freedom of the seas and global communications.

An example which has scarcely been reported: tropical hardwood such as teak is a global renewable resource being criminally squandered. Environmental groups are acutely aware of the issue and acutely powerless to

do anything about it in some places, such as Burma ("Myanmar," but who expects the name to last?). Would a threat of UN-sanctioned military intervention keep the vandal government of Burma from selling off its hardwood forests and its people's future livelihood? The idea seems unthinkable now. A few years from now it may seem unthinkable *not* to take action.

But seldom does environmental protection need to be that militaristic. Is there any reason to believe the military would be good at the mostly gentle role of environmental steward?

A rare federal hero of environmentalists these days is, of all things, the Army Corps of Engineers. In the last fifteen years the Army Corps has reversed its behavior, from destroying wetlands, channelizing rivers, and marching roughshod over local conservation interests, toward increasingly creating wetlands, restoring rivers, and responding to local conservation calls for help. All this from an agency that started with no environmental mandate at all.

By contrast, the recent record of federal agencies directly charged with solving serious environmental problems is more mixed. The Environmental Protection Agency's toxic-cleanup Superfund is bogged down in escalating legal costs of a scale to threaten the national economy. The National Park Service is facing its own infrastructure breakdown, having deferred maintenance on basic facilities so long that repair work often consists of "painting the rot." In

the Forest Service, programs for actively preserving public lands are constantly being proposed by staffers and just as constantly shot down in Washington for interfering with commercial interests (cattle, timber, mining) in the National Forest system.

How can that happen? It has to do with expectations. People expect *positive and immediate* results from agencies like the National Parks, Forest Service, and EPA — happy vacationers, income, cleaned-up toxic sites. No one has positive or immediate expectations of the military, only negative, long-term ones — keep war from our land at home and our interests abroad. Environmental problems are best addressed in similarly negative, long-range terms — keep the natural systems from crashing. Such slow, preventative programs are evidently better run by career officers, as in the Army Corps, than by political appointees, as in the EPA, National Parks, and Forest Service.

An element in the military's favor for an active environmental role is its experience in making radical programs work by sheer decree. Way back in 1948 President Harry Truman declared that the US military shall integrate the races in its ranks, starting now. The Pentagon took a deep breath, saluted, and complied, the first and most powerful of American institutions to integrate. A man of Colin Powell's abilities as head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was a natural result. The same occurred with giving the sexes equal opportunity in the military, a fact overlooked by the public until the Gulf War but long lauded by studious feminists such as Betty Friedan.

If there is an example of socialism that works in the world, it is the US military, capable of carrying out large, slow missions, funded by the seething market economy it protects. I saw it work during two years of active duty as an Army officer in the early '60s. You have job security, lifetime benefits, and a relatively money-free personal economy. You go where you're told and do what you're told, and you feel surprising personal freedom from the gibbering

options and threats of American civilian life. You can relax and do your job, and often the job you do makes you proud.

Following the Gulf War, the US military is bursting with pride and a sense of competence to undertake any task. It prefers humanitarian tasks, such as defending Kurds or aiding Bangladesh typhoon victims. But America has a habit of forgetting its military between wars and giving it no assignments besides laying low and being ready. So the talent and the money get spent on training (with a side-benefit of public education) and on weapons systems (with a fractional side-benefit of technology transfer).

Occasionally a rogue program such as the old ARPA — Advanced Research Projects Agency — puts a few million dollars into a long-term-benefit program such as basic research in computer science in the early '60s. That single project gave America a ten- to twenty-year lead on the world in computer technology and led directly to the personal computer revolution and its associated economic boom (and also a lower-casualty victory with smart weapons in the Gulf). The perhaps lamentable fact is that the best funder of basic science in Washington is the Pentagon. Environmental science needs money — long-term, reliable, large scale money. Where could it be better spent to protect the world from war over the long run?

Military people are public servants, dedicated to the point of risking and sometimes losing their lives — it is called "the service." A frustration I remember of military life is not being called upon to actually serve the public very often; you feel a keen regret for all that ability going to waste in variations on the exercise of digging holes and filling them in. My platoon could have made short work of restoring a salmon stream, assisting a controlled forest burn, helping protect African wildlife from poachers, or planting native shrubs at the edge of a growing desert. I wonder if they might get the opportunity. ☺

BACKGROUND OF THIS PIECE

Trained as a biologist and an infantry lieutenant, I've seldom had a chance to combine those two clarifying fields. The idea for this piece came up in conversation with a staffer at the Sierra Club who was lauding recent efforts of the Army Corps of Engineers. I worked up the text last year, originally for the Global Business Network, which I co-founded with Peter Schwartz and others in 1988 (his recent book The Art of the Long View summarizes what GBN is up to in terms of long-term strategic planning).

Schwartz suggested I send the piece to Time magazine. The "Time Essay" editor was intrigued and asked to hold on to the article for a couple of months while he tried to slide it through the system. He offered a handsome kill fee if it wasn't used which didn't take me long to agree to. After a few months went by, the nice check from Time arrived, and I showed the piece to an editor of the New York Times op ed page. He liked it, suggested revisions, which I made, and he showed it to the senior editors, who said no. A similar sequence happened with the Washington Post, even though it was one of their random months when they like the military.

So, what the hell, I showed the piece to Howard Rheingold. He didn't have to ask anybody's permission to run it. — SB

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