Prelude to War: U.S. Unpreparedness for Hostilities

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When a one reviews the military of the United States, in the 21st century, he or she will find the best equipped, best trained and most professional military in the world. The stunning victory in Desert Storm and the battle stages of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, this provides circumstantial support of the hypothesis listed above. This state of readiness and material superiority has not always been present in the United States military. From the early to mid 20th century, the U.S. Military was totally unprepared for outbreak of hostilities on a scale greater than small regional conflicts.

At the beginnings of WW II and Korea the U.S. Military was poorly equipped, and fielded most outdated material. The military forces were not adequately trained, due partly to the state and lack of equipment but also they were severely undermanned. Two separate battles, the battle of Kasserine Pass in WW II and Task Force Smith during Korea War emphasize these points.

As one looks at the state of readiness today the question raised is, “How did this happen?” Both WWII and the Korean War erupted after a time of jubilation following many years of global conflict and a subsequent reduction in the armed forces personnel and equipment. After WW I most Americans and establishments believed we would never have another war on that scale, because WWI was called, “the war to end all wars.” Why would a nation maintain the high cost of a huge military force? These same thoughts prevailed at the end of WWII. The U.S. and the world were thrown into a depression during the 1930’s. Many western nations feared the threat of Communism that was on the rise after WWII but the U.S. armed forces were totally unprepared for the first armed conflict to stem the spread of communism, on the peninsula of Korea.
At the end of WWI, America’s military force stood at approximately 4.7 million personnel overall. Its forces had been victorious in a global campaign whose likes had never been seen and were believed to never be seen again. The American population, prior to WWI, preferred isolation over involvement in global conflicts, which did not directly affect the interests of the United States, therefore after the armistice was signed America was ready to return to this isolationist policy. The military was reduced from its wartime strength to an authorized strength of 130,000 Regular Army and 450,000 National Guard. The military budget, which drastically reduced procurement of equipment and restricted advancements in technology, was reduced by U.S. government. As the world slipped into depression, the forces were reduced further. By 1936 the Regular Army had been reduced to 110,000 and roughly 225,000 National Guard. Budget expenditures were cut drastically.

With the state of the American economy in the 1930’s the people were greatly concerned with the government’s spending. What limited funds were available, were used on job programs, food production/distribution, and other economic stimulus programs aimed to get America back on its feet. There was a point that large groups of Americans considered communism or fascism.

In 1933, a group led by the DuPont and J.P. Morgan empires approached General Smedley Butler, offering unlimited funding and 500,000 men, asking him to organize and conduct a Military Coup. If successful, they were going to install a fascist government modeled after Mussolini’s Italy. This never materialized due to General Butler reporting this to Congress but does make a point about one of the many challenges America was facing at the time.
Due to the reduction of personnel and budget cuts, the U.S. military was becoming a very vulnerable force. By the mid 1930’s the military had completely exhausted the stockpiles of munitions. What equipment, machinery and weaponry that were left over from WWI had been used, was worn out, broken or outdated. There was at best, minimal production and procurement of replacement of updated equipment and supplies. There were minor advancements made in technology, weapons and equipment during this time. Due to the economic environment, advanced weaponry was either produced in small numbers or not at all.

The major reduction in numbers of personnel also brought additional challenges that started to come to light about this time. Due to the drastic cuts and the prosperous state of the economy immediately following WWI, the majority of younger, non-career officers and men left the military. A large number of senior officers and noncommissioned officers returned to pre-war ranks and billets, leaving a void in front line combat experience and leadership. This shift in experienced leadership showed in tactics and training, as the military continued to prepare for the “next” war, which they did not expect to actually occur, and prepared to fight the “last” war. Putting this together, by the early to mid 1930’s the U.S. had a military that had been stripped of manpower, financially hindered to the point it could barely replace old equipment, let alone test, produce and acquire newer advanced technology. What training was attempted was completed with old and outdated equipment and doctrine. Add to this the isolationist view of the American Public; the U.S. was totally unprepared for war.

During the years between WWII and Korea, many of the same issues that caused the U.S. unpreparedness for the outbreak of hostilities prior to WWII repeated themselves.
The U.S. had accomplished a major victory during WWII and was eager to return to a peacetime existence. There were drastic cuts made to the military strength, which removed from service a large number of young, experienced, combat proven officers and noncommissioned Officers. There were also large reductions in funding, which had an effect on the ability to conduct quality training and update equipment. True, there were huge surpluses of equipment and supplies at the end of WW II and this was a fairly short time frame, but unlike prior to WW II, major advancements in technology were being made. The world moved into the jet age and was experimenting with nuclear technology and while there had been some improvements made in conventional weaponry, as before they were being produced in limited numbers, therefore minimizing the chances to train on them. These were just some of the issues the military as a whole faced. For elements of the 24th Infantry Division, in particular, the 21st Infantry Regiment soon to be known as Task Force Smith. There were additional challenges; the 21st Infantry Regiment along with most other military units in Japan had been an Army of occupation since the end of WWII. Most units were under the authorized peacetime strength, their primary mission was to occupy a foreign nation and combat training was secondary. They were living life in a colonial Army, Officers and Noncommissioned Officers were leading very comfortable lives, some complete with servants. Soldiers were allowed to live off base; drinking, boredom and loneliness were taking their toll on the combat readiness of the forces of occupation. This along with certain other habits picked up during WWII, were having their effect on military order and discipline.

Another issue facing the occupation army in Japan was the ability to train. The island of Japan is very densely populated, and the amount of land available for training, was at
best, minimal. Heavy and medium tanks were sent away and light tanks were kept for training purposes, but they were not able to maneuver with live rounds. Tactical training was kept at squad, platoon and some company level. Battalion and larger training events were almost nonexistent, let alone joint force training. Field Artillery units were only allowed to conduct live fire training once a year. Training that could be conducted in garrison was executed effectively, and they were able to maintain some proficiency. But without being able to conduct field exercises and live fire training, key elements such as recoilless rifle crews and mortar teams were unable to maintain proficiency.

Once again, in just a few short years, what had been the most dominant military force the then modern world had seen was under strength, ill equipped and inadequately trained. Add to this that the focus on the next war would again be in Europe, what happened came as somewhat of a surprise. North Korea invaded South Korea, and some of the senior leaders in the pacific thought a mere show of force and the North Koreans would retreat back to the north. Therefore a Battalion size force under LTC Smith, was committed to be a blocking force to slow or stop the advance of the North Korean Army until other elements could be put in place. This unit became known as Task Force Smith, and they were soon to be facing, not a make-shift, rag tag army ready to cut and run as soon as they found out were facing U.S. Forces, but a far superior, better equipped, trained and highly motivated army in the opening battle of the Korean war.

After WWI most Americans and establishments believed we would never have another war on that scale, because WWI was called the war that would end all wars. So why maintain a huge military force. These same thoughts prevailed at the end of WW II. For this time period in military history it’s a proven statement the history repeated itself.
Conclusion

As one looks at the state of readiness today one wonders “How did this happen?”
Both of these wars came after a time of jubilation but also crisis. After WWI most
Americans and establishments believed there would never be another war on that scale.
Why maintain a huge military force? These same thoughts prevailed at the end of
WWII. The U.S. and the world were thrown into a depression in the 1930’s. Threat of
Communism was on the rise after WW II, but we were totally unprepared for the first
battle in the cold war which was a place called Korea. Both times at the outbreak of
hostilities our forces were facing a numerically superior, better trained, equipped and
highly motivated enemy. After the Korean War, the evolution started and has progressed
to what it is today, the U.S. is able to commit the best trained, equipped force there is to
anywhere in the world on a moment’s notice.
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