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PREDICTIONS, OBSERVATIONS, AND THE FREE LUNCH

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My first prediction for the New Year was going to be that Don't Ask; Don't Tell (DADT) would be repealed, but in a surprise move the outgoing Congress beat me to it by making that a reality. Now comes the time for the certification process and implementation. The public is tired of the continued debate, the readiness argument is long suspected of being a red herring, and policies viewed as exclusionary usually have a very limited shelf life. The date on the toe-tag will be 2011.

My second prediction is that our Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen will salute smartly and make the repeal of DADT work just as they do with any other challenge. Regardless of where one stands on the issue, the members of the uniformed services generally suppress their personal opinions once a decision is made and move out with purpose to accomplish the mission. These professionals made integration of the races and the genders work; they will make this new policy work as well. The profession will survive and continue to thrive.

Those who benefited from racial and gender integration have successfully assimilated into the armed forces and continue to perform magnificently. Just ask the families of the two African American Medal of Honor recipients who received their medals posthumously for action during the Korean War, our first conflict after integration.¹ Before Korea and integration, there were only 57 medals awarded to African American soldiers.² Additionally, ask the two female soldiers who were awarded the Silver Star for combat action in Iraq and Afghanistan. They provide strong evidence that we should soon resolve the argument that women cannot perform in combat.³ Of course, there will be some stray interviews and Op-Eds, but leaders will lead, and the new policy will be followed just like the previous policies that were as equally contentious in their day were followed. I am confident.

On the observation side, the announcement of the extension of our commitment in Afghanistan to the year 2014 marks a major and healthy strategic re-look. Stability in Afghanistan is in our national interest, as well as in the interests of the nations represented by the NATO mission there. We need to continually reconsider the strategies that we develop that address the evolving threats to our national security, especially since strategies that fail to adapt to changing conditions are usually doomed to failure.

As we move into a post-OIF and post-OEF strategic environment, we should also re-examine our national interests. Is it in our interest to spread democracy throughout the Islamic world? Is our form of democracy right for everyone? Are we more secure for that effort? Which is more dangerous, a nuclear Iran or an unstable Mexico? Who is more of a threat to our national security? The La Familia Drug Cartel and Los Zetas, or Iranians?

The second observation is really two that are interconnected. We will need to re-examine the role of our reserve forces, and nurture our veterans once we bring them home from combat. The second and third order effects of OIF and OEF will be larger than that of any previous conflict, and the impact on our reserve forces will be more serious than at any other time since World War II. Moreover, since the average American lives longer, the national commitment to them will concomitantly be for a longer period.

First, we should look at aligning our light and special operations forces in the Active Component and move the heavier forces into the Reserve Component where they can be prepared for prolonged kinetic operations that, presumably, would be characterized by longer warning times. OIF and OEF both put to rest the concern by some about the ability to have access to the National Guard, a major argument for maintaining two Reserve Components. The time may be ripe to gain some efficiency by combining the Reserve and the National Guard into one Reserve Component (RC) that supports an expeditionary Active Component. This new RC could be employed more effectively in the “dual” constitutional missions of today’s National Guard, making our reserve forces truly strategic and effectively operational when required. We should come to the realization that neither the Active Component nor the Reserve Component can be everything to everybody all the time.

The second part of the observation brings us cause for concern for the coming year. We are locked in one of the worst economic crises since the Great Depression, and we are entering a period with the largest group of returning veterans since Viet Nam. At the same time, another wave of retirees of the All Volunteer Force will begin to “hang up their spurs.” These veterans entered the military under a set of expectations for their military service based on a promise from the society they serve. The “deal” is that those who join the military agree to risk their lives to defend the nation at the direction of the civilian leadership. In return, the nation will agree to take care of the service member and their families with medical care when wounded, insurance when fallen, and a secure retirement upon completion of a faithful, full career. This is a sacred compact, a crucial element of the all-volunteer professional military, and a centerpiece of civil-military relations. Though this is the same contract entered by previous career service members, the sheer size of our professional career military dwarfs previous generations.

Many in our freshman class in the 112th Congress, the Class of 2011 ran on a platform of reducing spending and cutting entitlements. We must remind ourselves that military retirement and benefits come from the “entitlement” account. These benefits are the price the nation pays to ensure we have the most professional and powerful

military in the world. The choice to pay these entitlements was made when we discarded the conscription force. Many now will argue that a return to the conscription force would reconcile a perceived rift between the military and the civilian society it serves.

A cut in retirement benefits could create a far worse moral burden as opposed to a financial burden if we renege on the sacred compact between the military member and the society he or she serves. Though the talk of providing a lump sum pay-out at retirement, similar to other armies, may save millions initially, such a plan may potentially cost more over time.⁴ We have tried these economic experiments before. Examples are available, such as the 1932 adjustment to Service Certificate Law of 1924, which resulted in the ill-fated Bonus March. Post-conflict "Reductions in Force," when done with a broad brush, eliminate whole generations of talent that cannot be replaced. A more recent example of a not well thought out financial efficiency was the Redux retirement plan of 1986. It may have been one of the causes of a migration of a whole generation of military expertise. Only an amendment in 2000 providing for a \$30,000 lump sum payout made the program moderately acceptable. In the end, Redux may have cost us more than what it saved.

Granted, the Defense Department and supporting industries will have to take a share in cuts as we come out of our current operations. That is only reasonable. However, a slash across the board to entitlements, though appealing to some, will break faith with our military and may cost us some of our best and brightest. It is a cost we cannot afford.

Yet, opening military service to a wider segment of the population may strengthen civil-military relations. A re-look at our national interests and security needs, along with a reapportionment of forces, may gain real efficiencies. Defense cuts should be well thought out and based on national interests and our security requirements rather than economics alone. This would be a thoughtful approach to defense budget reductions as opposed to an expedient way out achieved by cutting a wide swath through the defense budget.

One should remember we get what we pay for and, as the saying goes, "there is no free lunch."

ENDNOTES

1. Sergeant Cornelius H Charlton and Private First Class William H. Thompson, Washington, DC: Center for Military History, available from www.history.army.mil/html/moh/koreanwar.html.

2. Though President Truman ordered desegregation of the Armed Forces in 1948, full desegregation did not occur until 1953, available from www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=chronology.

3. Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester was the first since WWII in 2005, and Specialist Monica Lin Brown the second in 2008. However, Specialist Brown was removed from combat after the action because of the rule banning women from direct combat action, available from www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/30/AR2008043003415.html.

4. The British Army offers a lump sum nontaxable payout along with a smaller annual pension. Singapore offers a lump sum and mandatory retirement at age 45.

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