



November 2009

ARMY FOOTBALL AND FULL SPECTRUM OPERATIONS

Dr. Stephen J. Gerras
Department of Command, Leadership, and Management
U.S. Army War College

As senior leaders envision the future direction for the U.S. Army in a post-Iraq/Afghanistan world, they can benefit from recognizing the potential pitfalls that may be encountered when attempting to align an organization with its probable future environment. For an excellent case study on how not to prepare for the future, we need look no further than Army football. Over a decade's worth of poor decisions regarding the West Point football program clearly demonstrates how organizations—especially those with military mindsets—tend to ignore the world as it is, in favor of a world as they wish it to be.

After nine miserable football seasons using a passing-centric offense, this year West Point finally gave in to reality and committed to a new coach and a return to an option running offense that it stopped using in 1999. How did the Army program get to this point? And more importantly, what can we learn from the recent depressing history of Army football? The downfall of Army football began in 1997 with the decision to join Conference USA. Unlike Navy, which avoided conference alignment, Army succumbed to the allure of potential TV revenue and automatic bowl bids and joined Conference USA following their 1996 spectacular 10 win and 2 loss season. The decision to join the conference ignored the reality of the previous 25 years in which Army's successful seasons included not only an option-oriented offense, but careful scheduling of opposing teams (to include several nonmajor college schools each year). There was an unspoken philosophy that Army's schedule would include "sure wins," "possible wins," and "dream wins." Joining Conference USA removed this scheduling flexibility.

In the eyes of many Army football faithful, the decision to join Conference USA was a clear example of a decision rooted in an outdated frame of reference—namely the West Point championship teams of the mid-1940s in which Army routinely dominated the nation's best football programs. A more reflective assessment would have discerned that between 1970 and 1997 Army had only two seasons where it beat six major college football teams or more. In fact, during that period Army averaged two and a half wins per season against major college programs. In Conference USA, Army was required to play a minimum of 11 major college teams each season. Therefore, it should not be a

surprise that Army averaged only two wins per season during its 7 years in the conference.

In response to several dismal initial years in Conference USA, West Point fired its option-oriented coach and hired the first of three coaches, each of whom preferred a passing offense over the option running attack. The egregiousness of West Point's decision to move away from the option is captured in its record during the last 35 years of Army football. During that period, Army had eight winning and eight losing seasons with the option, and one winning and 18 losing seasons without the option. Air Force and Navy, on the other hand, built solid programs centered on an option offense that continue to this day.

As the U.S. Army contemplates its future national security role, there is a danger that the U.S. Army, like West Point and its fixation on recreating the national championship era of the mid-1940s, will also attempt to recreate a U.S. Army based on its most successful year—the last year of World War II. During that time, a large, conventional Army marched across Europe to defeat an evil regime. In subsequent years, the notion that the U.S. Army's mission was to fight high intensity war was ingrained in the post-World War II era during 45 years of a Soviet-centric Cold War.

The U.S. Army maintained this approach through the Korean and Vietnam Wars which were framed as exceptions rather than the norm. The end of the Cold War fostered an ambiguous sense of purpose for the U.S. Army, and it also mandated the development of a new vision. In the years after DESERT STORM, the U.S. Army minimized the realities of the post-Cold War strategic environment epitomized by conflicts in places like Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, because of the desire to return to the glory era of World War II. Instead of paying attention to the contemporary operating environment, the U.S. Army, during the 1990s, built the Army it wanted, not the Army the nation needed.

Eight years of full spectrum fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan have given us the opportunity to change the U.S. Army's frame of reference, and yet, even in the face of this once in a century opportunity, we are already hearing calls to eventually refocus on the high end, vice the low end, of full spectrum operations. Such a course will fly in the face of an environment that should cause us to do otherwise. Unfortunately, we will justify this narrow focus by emphasizing that a lack of concentration on the high end of full spectrum operations will assume too much risk. We will also assert that if we are capable of fighting high intensity operations, then certainly we can easily transition to low intensity conflicts. Both of these assumptions may be flawed and no more valid than believing Army football can compete in Conference USA or that West Point will win with a passing offense. In all these instances, the assertions are evidence of a logic based on the world as we wish it to be, and not the world as it is.

Certainly, there will be those who disagree and assert that the U.S. Army understands the future nature of war and the accompanying mandate to create a balanced force across the full operational spectrum. But a "balanced" force should not have to be directed by the Secretary of Defense to shift priorities away from the pursuit of flat-bottomed, mounted ground vehicles found in the \$160 billion Future Combat System

program when a single insurgent with copper wire, a battery, and a 155mm artillery round can render them useless.

Of course, just as the Army football team should be prepared to pass on a third and long situation, we will always need some high intensity capable formations. But times have changed, and our structure, manning, and resourcing should reflect the new environment. Unlike Army football, however, fighting the nation's wars is not a game, and a losing season is not an option.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This opinion piece is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI opinion pieces should contact the Publications Department via e-mail at *SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil*. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter, U.S. Army War College."