

Ready for Unreadiness?

By John T. Correll, EDITOR IN CHIEF

NO CHANGE in the armed forces over the past ten years has been more impressive than the gain in military readiness. In 1988, for example, Tactical Air Command achieved an 88.2 percent combined mission-capable rate for its operational fighters. That was the best rate ever and forty-nine percent better than in 1980. Last year, 83.6 percent of the TAC aircraft that landed in need of repair were ready to go again within eight hours. In 1980, only 32.4 percent could be back in the air that promptly.

These improvements and others in the fitness of today's combat forces did not happen by chance. They are the result of a sustained financial commitment to training, adequate support, and equipment that is more reliable and easier to maintain.

Unfortunately, readiness is expensive. It is with bitter regret that the armed forces, pushed into a corner by one budget reduction after another, have now conceded that they cannot hold the high readiness standards seen these last few years. They recognize that they are losing something important.

An altogether different perspective was expressed by Edward N. Luttwak, writing in the *Washington Post* of February 21. He says that the readiness budget can and should be cut for sound strategic reasons, and that we should seek better value for our defense dollar than "the costly upkeep of immediate warfighting capability." We have an opportunity to do this, he says, because Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has "radically altered the political atmosphere" and "removed the once very real threat that Soviet forces might launch a surprise attack on the West."

No dewy-eyed dreamer, Mr. Luttwak acknowledges that Soviet power has increased in the Gorbachev era, that military production continues undiminished, and that there has been very little change in the Soviet armed forces. He contends, however, that for the first time since the 1920s, "the Soviet public is not being kept in a state of moral war-readiness" and that "the regime cannot possibly start a war without prolonged psychological preparation."

He proposes that the Pentagon shift its resources into programs for long-term security and cut back severely on training, fuel, replacement parts, and expendables consumed by high-tempo peacetime operations. Readiness, he says, "is purchased day by day for that day, and has little lasting value."

Mr. Luttwak, who is among the best known of the defense reformers, occasionally has some good ideas—

but this is not one of them. Decreased readiness may be a financial imperative, but the nation should recognize the risk that it runs.

The danger has not disappeared, even if the probability of immediate conflict is low. Mr. Gorbachev's domestic program is a ticking time bomb. The Soviet empire in Eastern Europe is restless and stirring. The Middle East is as volatile as ever.

It is not difficult to imagine events that could bring the crisis mentality back in a hurry.

Drawdown of nuclear weapons in Europe gives an even greater military advantage to Soviet conventional forces that are equipped, trained, and positioned for offensive action. It is, therefore, with some hazard that we reduce our own readiness. There are also long-term consequences.

Once readiness is lost, it cannot be recovered instantly. About two years elapse, for example, between the budgeting for spare parts and the time they appear in squadron supply bins. If maintenance backlogs are left alone, they tend to get worse. When maintenance has to borrow a part off one airplane to fix another, the mission-capable rate drops precipitously.

Experience and training levels are built up slowly. A squadron's combat edge emerges gradually in the course of exercises, deployments, and everyday operations. If we decide suddenly that we want readiness back, it will not be possible to run all the aircrews through Red Flag in two months. Another consideration is safety. If pilots train only enough to maintain minimum proficiency, we can look for an increase in accidents.

Investment in long-term security is important. Nobody argues that case more emphatically than the Air Force Association and this magazine. It is also true—if only because the budget-makers have made it so—that the current round of reductions cannot skip over readiness without doing catastrophic damage to other aspects of military capability.

It will be discouraging, but probably not disastrous, if the mission-capable rate slips a couple of percentage points. Regression toward the "hollow forces" condition of ten years ago, however, would be cause for alarm.

The ultimate measure of a military force is its ability to fight today. Even deterrence, the strategy of leading an adversary to keep the peace by making victory in war impossible or not worth the price, derives from that. For a nation that is serious about protecting itself and its interests in the world, a marginally trained, poorly supplied, half-supported military force is no bargain. ■