

Security

(originally published in the *Armchair General*)

LTC(R) Robert R. Leonhard

In the climactic last scene of the 1983 hit movie, “Wargames,” the quirky computer that Matthew Broderick nearly pushes into starting World War III concludes that in thermonuclear war, the only safe strategy is not to play. The same is true regarding the age-old principle of security. In modern conflict, absolute security against enemy action is impossible to achieve, unless one is removed from the conflict altogether. While our official doctrine still cites the principle’s wise-sounding advice—“Never permit the enemy to acquire unexpected advantage”—in practice, this ideal is quite literally unachievable. Instead, a proper understanding of security leads to the careful balancing of competing forces.

The most obvious flaw in the old principle of security is that it does not acknowledge the essential tradeoff between security and activity. In the name of security, a general might fortify his army, dig them in up to their eyeballs, surround them with minefields and checkpoints, erect a wall of anti-aircraft and anti-missile defenses, and build barriers throughout the area. Such measures would make his position proof against all but a nuclear attack, but the drawback to the general’s solution is obvious: his army, while well protected, isn’t doing anything. Real war requires action, not just security. These two ideas trade off against each other: security measures inhibit activity, and activity is inherently dangerous.

The real issue in war, then, is not striving for absolute security, but rather finding the proper balance between activity and security. In the spring of 1862, General Henry Halleck took six weeks to advance twenty miles to Corinth, Mississippi, entrenching his army six times along the way. When he finally

reached his objective, the enemy was long gone. This ponderous “advance by the spade” illustrates an imbalance between security and activity: Halleck suffered few casualties, but he allowed the enemy to escape, thus in all likelihood lengthening the war. Yet it was General Grant’s carelessness and the shockingly bloody Battle of Shiloh earlier that month that showed what happens when an army does not pay enough attention to security measures. A little security would have gone a long way to avoiding the Union’s desperate straits at Shiloh. The key is *balance*.

In our own day, the threat of global insurgency and terrorism has cast a new light on the problem of security. Terrorist tactics aim at the unprotected. Rather than attempting to engage the enemy’s “center of gravity”—a term that German military philosopher equated with a source of strength—terrorists typically go after soft targets. The problem is that in a modern, liberal society, soft targets are in abundance. To erect defenses that would protect all of our society’s vulnerabilities would be prohibitively expensive in time, treasure, and liberties. Does this mean that free societies must acquiesce in their fundamental insecurity? Yes and no.

The purpose of a well thought-out security strategy against terror is not to forestall any conceivable violent act. The fact remains that if a person decides to kill someone or destroy something, even at the cost of his own life, there is little anyone can do to stop it. However, the threat of terror becomes proportionately more problematic when more than one individual is involved. The greater the number of people involved in planning, preparing, and carrying out illegal acts, the more likely they will be detected and thwarted. Security measures should therefore be aimed at complicating the terrorists’ endeavors to the degree that they expose their intentions to detection.

If the horrible attack of 9/11 had been reduced to just one aircraft, it would have been a big event, but not a catastrophic one. The emotional impact of that day emanated from the fact that there were *four* planes—evidence of a huge conspiracy and comprehensive plans. When future acts of terror threaten our

country, our security measures should be counted successful if they reduce the enemy to isolated acts.

As in the tactical sphere, so also in strategy, security measures must be balanced with activity. Although deploying combat power, diplomats, and civilian workers overseas is inherently dangerous, a proper application of the principle of security requires that we avoid a “bunker” mentality, in which we seek endlessly to harden our defenses within our own borders. Instead, we will reinforce our defenses somewhat, while we simultaneously prosecute a proactive foreign policy designed to defeat terrorist organizations abroad.

What is the role of information age technology in matters of security? In brief, information allows us to economize security measures. The Battle of Britain provides a good example of this phenomenon. As British planners considered how to defend against waves of German attacking aircraft, one of their main problems was pilot fatigue. In order to detect and intercept inbound aircraft in time, it was thought that the Royal Air Force would have to keep scout aircraft aloft. This continual wear on the pilots and the aircraft was not sustainable for long. Fortunately, radar intervened. When the Chain Home Defense radar system was erected, it permitted the RAF to detect raids without having to use pilots for reconnaissance. Instead, they could garner their strength for decisive combat. Technology allowed them to economize their security efforts.

In the same way, modern technology goes a long way on the battlefield and within our borders to reducing the manpower burden of security. A modern American joint task force has a comprehensive suite of sensors searching through the electromagnetic spectrum for any emerging threats. The most immediate result is that the commander does not have to bleed off his potential combat power and divert as many soldiers to surveillance. Of course a clever enemy will look for ways to fool or avoid our sensors, so there is a continuing need for redundancy and humans-in-the-loop.

The classical principle of security has always been misleading, because it lacks an explicit understanding of balance and thus offers only dubious and often

irrelevant advice. The modern art and science of war demands energetic and innovative approaches to security, but also balances security measures against activity, cost, and information. The goal will be to avoid a future Corinth on the one hand, and a Shiloh on the other.