

# AMERICA'S FAVORITE WHIPPING BOYS

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## Both Left and Right Misrepresent the American Military

TOM CLANCY

**T**he American military hasn't done anything right since the Inchon landing. It was unable to win in Korea, lost Vietnam completely, and had more than 200 Marines killed at Beirut through military incompetence—not to mention what happened to USS *Stark*—and barely managed to knock off a few hundred Cuban construction workers in Grenada. It's equipped with weapons that cost millions but don't work terribly well, if at all.

The Russian military is the most formidable in the world, lavishly equipped with more tanks, guns, ships, and aircraft than the rest of the world combined—all of which, being nice and simple, work quite well, *spasivo*—designed with one single task in mind: the utter destruction of Western culture.

At least, those are the two views we hear from the political Left and the political Right, respectively. Together, these views form an unholy—not to say illogical—alliance between the Left and Right, resulting in a distorted view of the world balance of power that is as grotesque as it is damaging. In both cases, the distortion results from a fundamental lack of understanding based on a combination of intellectual laziness and ideological preconceptions that do not allow for the objective examination of evidence. Both sides are equally guilty.

### Waiting for a Strategy

The American military—at least the service I know best, the Navy—is the most capable in the history of the world. That's not the same as “perfect,” by the way, and in any case the effectiveness of any country's military is, in isolation, totally irrelevant. An army or a navy is a tool of national policy. Like any tool, a military establishment must have a purpose other than mere existence. When used, it is supposed to have a clear mission, preferably a mission that bears some semblance to its design. Anyone can use a wrench to drive a nail, and many do, but a hammer is better suited to the task. It is wrong and downright foolish to blame a wrench for not driving a nail well.

This has not recently been true of the U.S. military. One might remember that Korea was actually a success, even after Inchon. The mission of the U.S. Army was to prevent the conquest of South Korea by the Communist North. In view of the fact that the republic of Korea has just had

democratic elections, it is reasonable to observe that the mission was accomplished. Vietnam was a different matter entirely, however.

Blaming the Pentagon for Vietnam is akin to blaming surgeons for cancer deaths. On being assigned the mission of preventing the conquest of the Republic of Vietnam, the service chiefs drew upon their professional experience and made their proposals for carrying out the task. It was not their fault that their advice was not heeded. They got the blame, of course, but armies rarely choose their missions and almost never choose constraints on carrying them out. A severely ill patient who ignores his physician's advice will probably die, and even in contemporary society his heirs probably cannot sue successfully for malpractice; yet this is precisely what happened in Vietnam, and the blame carries on to this day.

### Disarmament as “Military Reform”

People on the left look at Vietnam as the vindication of their political views: We failed, therefore we should never have gone; therefore we should never attempt anything even vaguely similar to Vietnam. (It is singularly ironic that the same politicians look fondly upon domestic programs founded by the same president who gave us Vietnam, but this is not the place to discuss what the Great Society has done to the American poor.) In supporting this political view, they find the reason for failure in the military itself. There are, I regret to observe, individuals on the political scene who would rather trash our young people in uniform than hug their own kids. Nothing is too small to ridicule. The stories of the overpriced hammers and toilet seats are repeated until they become as permanent as the figures on Mount Rushmore, despite the fact that they are inaccuracies at best, and outright lies at worst.

The Left has even sprouted its own “military reform” movement. It is noteworthy, first of all, for its single consistent thread: the weapons they oppose have real offensive capability, and those they suggest have none at all. Three examples are diesel-electric submarines versus nuclear ones, small carriers versus large ones, small, short-range

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**What distinguished Grenada from Vietnam and Beirut was a clear mission and the delegation of command authority to the men on the scene.**

fighters versus large, long-range ones. Every submarine officer I know has served aboard or commanded a diesel submarine; they *all* think that nuclear is the way to go. Had Great Britain retained full-sized carriers—or even just one—capable of power-projection instead of replacing them with smaller, less capable ships, the Falklands War would never have happened. The Israelis say the big, long-range F-15 Eagle is the best fighter in the world.

What objective evidence are the “reformers” looking at? The people who actually do the work don’t seem to agree with their data. Their objective, therefore, appears to be ideologically based: if we remove America’s capacity for taking war to the enemy, the threat that America poses to world peace can thus be reduced. Unable to make this statement openly, they propose that their weapons systems are superior, blithely contradicting the people who actually use them on a day-to-day basis.

### **Blaming the Military First**

But what really galls me are the attacks on the men and women of our armed forces. They’re stupid, the Left puts it bluntly. The commander of the Marines at Beirut was yet another example of military incompetence. We are supposed to believe that he chose to be at that precise spot, to have that precise mission (whatever it was), and decided that it was the militarily prudent action not to have his sentries load their rifles. That doesn’t sound like any Marine I know. Nor did any fighter-bomber pilot in Vietnam ever decide that it was improper to attack a SAM site under construction (or MiGs on the ground), but rather to give the enemy the chance to complete it (or take off) before attacking, to make things more sporting.

The most recent example is USS *Stark*. The captain could have done better, but he did not choose to be in a war zone with an equivocal mission and rules of engagement that required him to be at war, and at peace, at the same time. One might also note that Lieutenant (j.g.) John F. Kennedy, USNR, was decorated after losing his command under more favorable tactical circumstances, while

Captain Glenn Brindel lost his career even though he saved *his* ship.

Any military formation, regardless of its quality, can be undone by orders imposed from above. You cannot fault a soldier, sailor, or airman for trying to obey orders, no matter how inappropriate, that are issued by a duly constituted civilian authority. The alternative, remember, is incompatible with American democracy.

Grenada, for all its faults as an operation, is an illustration in contrast. The mission was to rescue American students and neutralize the government forces of that small island. Despite only a few hours of preparation and the consequent lack of good intelligence information, the mission was carried out rapidly, with minimal loss of life to friendly forces. What distinguished Grenada from Vietnam and Beirut, however, was a clear mission concept and the delegation of command authority to the men on the scene. The result was success.

The Left, doubtless upset that our military did something right, again resorted to ridicule. The enemy, we are told now, were construction workers—whose shovels were apparently manufactured by Kalashnikov—who might as easily have been handled by a troop of Cub Scouts. The helicopters shot down were not lost to a few competent enemy gunners using effective Soviet weapons, but to faulty American tactics. “Tomato-tomahto,” a member of Congress said for the C-SPAN cameras, “Grenada-Grenahda: let’s call the whole thing off.” One’s jokes are a measure of one’s personal limitations, of course, but what I found especially offensive about this amateur comedian was that real guns were shooting real bullets at a friend of mine, a Navy helicopter pilot later decorated for rescuing 11 men whose UH-60 Blackhawk was snuffed out of the sky by the 23mm “shovels” of some Cuban “construction workers.” As much as the political Left (and its pet “reform” movement) claims to desire an effective military, it invariably shrinks from acknowledging that we might actually have one. Whipping boys are hard to come by, especially the kind required by oath to respect public

officials. It must be quite a thrill to abuse those who cannot reply in kind because of their loyalty to the constitutional process.

### Target Kirov

I wish I could report that the political Right takes a more realistic view of defense issues, but it just is not true.

In the past few years, I have been exposed to nearly every element of the American military, and it seems a great shame indeed that all the men and women I have met are doomed to death or (worse) capture by their Soviet counterparts at whatever time the Soviets decide to gobble up the rest of the world. At least that's the impression one gets. One can only conclude that all the sophisticated weapons we buy and all the fine young people we train are being bought and trained to lose.

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## A truly professional Soviet military might be more of a threat to the CPSU than to NATO.

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If there is something about that idea that bothers you, you should be bothered. You should, in fact, be offended.

Practically everyone has seen a glossy color photograph of the Russian "battlecruiser" *Kirov*, usually with an ominous caption about how she (the Soviets call ships "he," by the way) is the most powerful, best-armed surface warship built in the past generation. Back in 1983 I showed such a photograph to a friend of mine, a former commanding officer (C.O.) of an American submarine. "Tom, you know what that is?" he asked. "That's a Navy Cross that hasn't happened yet. That is a *target*." This view is shared by the skipper of every submarine in the United States Navy, and their main concern is that the British Royal Navy might get there first and spoil the fun.

The submarine community in the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy, in both of which I have quite a few friends, is composed of the most indecently confident professionals one could ever hope to meet. If anything, the Brits exude—nay, radiate—even more confidence, and my reluctant observation is that, man for man, they are somewhat better trained than the Americans because of a different career track for their officers and less oversight from on high. They also are allowed to admit that they spend time at sea—our guys emulate the clam, while the Brits will tell the occasional story. I sprung my friend's line about *Kirov* on one of them a few years ago and got an even better reply: "Tom, do you know that *Kirov* has a great bloody bow sonar, that it ensonifies the whole bloody ocean, but it doesn't tell its operators a bloody thing!" When I asked how he knew this, of course, all I got was the Submariner's Smile. This is the facial expression that tells you, in this case: *There I was, two thousand yards off her port bow, with a firing solution on all four fish, and he didn't know I was there despite the fact that his worthless bloody sonar*

*was hammering energy into the water.*

The submarine drivers in our Navy refer to the Soviet Navy as a "target-rich environment." The Brits are a bit more colorful.

So you have to ask yourself: why aren't American and British submarine captains properly terrified of the Soviet navy? Where does this confidence come from? *Can't they count?*

### Know Your Enemy

The confidence comes from the fact that, unique among Western military forces, the submarine community operates against the Soviets on a daily basis. The U.S. Navy has "Top Gun," and the Air Force has a virtually identical operation at Nellis AFB. The Army has the National Training Center, an incredible facility at Fort Irwin, California. At all of these installations, designated "aggressor" forces emulate Soviet tactics and doctrine to teach our men to fight the most likely major enemy. The submariners, however, can and do conduct the same sort of operations continually—against the real thing. That's one advantage of being in international waters, and being invisible. They track Soviet surface ships and submarines, gather intelligence information of various sorts, and generally conduct themselves as though on war footing at all times. To a submariner, the only difference between peace and war is pulling the trigger.

Their confidence, therefore, comes from the best possible perspective. The first rule of war is that one should know one's enemy; the men driving the fast-attack submarines do, and they think they can win.

The Soviet navy and the Soviet military in general look formidable. Anyone can get information on the numbers of ships and tanks and aircraft. That's called "bean-counting." It is an entirely valid approach, as far as it goes, but there is more to evaluating an enemy than counting beans.

What one cannot count in KH-11 photographs is the competence of the "drivers." The most cursory study of military history demonstrates that the decisive element on the battlefield is generally not raw numbers. At Cannae, Hannibal annihilated the largest army that Rome had ever fielded with a force only half as large. In France, in May 1940, the Germans defeated an Allied army with more of almost everything, including more and better tanks. For a more recent example, look at what has happened every time the Israelis have taken on the Arabs. In each case (and there are hundreds), the decisive factor was a combination of a skilled commander and professional troops.

An army or a navy is not a collection of tanks or missiles. A fighting force is composed of *people*. A tank is only a piece of steel—without a crew it won't go anywhere. Without proper maintenance support, even a good crew can't take it very far. The French navy throughout history was composed of better-designed ships than the Royal Navy that consistently defeated it. "Better to have good men in bad ships," as a submariner told me last year, "than bad men in good ships."

It's the men who count. (Women count, too, of course, but they're not allowed in combat arms at this writing.) How good are the Soviet soldiers and sailors?

The Soviet army is the first in modern history that tries



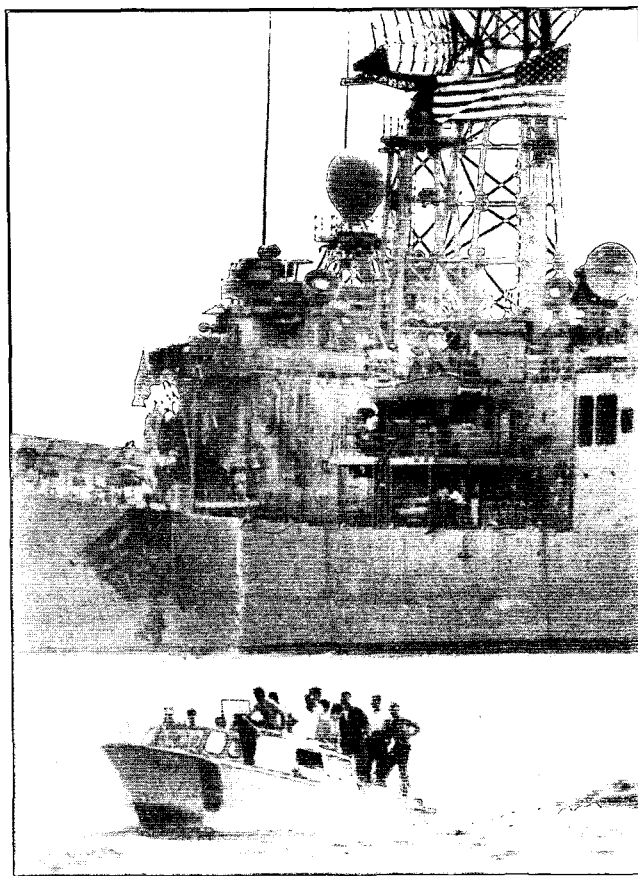
to function without sergeants. Oh, they do have “sergeants,” but what that means is that early into the conscription period individuals are selected on the basis of intelligence and political reliability to go to sergeant-school. After a few months they are sent to their units—but like everyone else, at the end of their two years, they go home. (It’s worth noting that nearly every adult Soviet male can be recalled to the colors as a reservist, but they receive no training after leaving active duty.) I need hardly point out that two years do not a sergeant make. It takes more like five. The point here is that sergeants make the armies of the world work, if they are to work at all—ask any professional officer; that fact goes all the way back to Caesar’s legions in Gaul—but the Soviets do not have them in any real sense.

### Sharp and Proud

When I go aboard a U.S. Navy ship, I am always struck by the same fact. You expect the officers to be sharp. They’re all college graduates, exquisitely trained, and reasonably well-paid. What always surprises, however, is the quality of the enlisted personnel. The average age is 22 or so. Most are high-school graduates with their first job, and they’ve been in for about four years. Already they have more experience than their Soviet counterparts (the conscription period in the Soviet navy is three years, and two years in their army). These kids are sharp. They are proud. They know why they’re out there. They all have responsibilities. If a radar breaks, some 21-year-old kid fixes it, probably with the advice of a senior petty officer or a chief. Enlisted men on our ships stand watches. I’ve seen a Signalman First Class conn (direct the course of) his ship as the Junior Officer of the Deck, and a Chief Petty Officer stand watch as Officer of the Deck, with a new ensign—that is, an *officer*—as *his* conning officer. That’s called democracy in action.

By contrast, when a Soviet navy ship is underway, either the captain or the *starpom* (executive officer) is always on the bridge—and if they have a flag officer aboard, the admiral frequently rides the bridge and gives rudder orders. Think about that for a moment; it consistently astounds American officers. How much confidence do Soviet captains have in their junior officers (and how much do Soviet admirals have in their C.O.’s?), and how will a captain be an effective warrior if he spends 12 hours per day, *every* day sitting on the bridge?

If something aboard a Soviet ship breaks, generally an officer fixes it—he has to, because the sailors don’t know how. As a result, the best way the Soviets have to make sure things don’t break is not to use them. While American sailors conduct DSOTs (daily systems operations tests) every day, the Soviets for the most part don’t even turn on their radars, much less their weapons mounts. Their “days out of port” numbers may look impressive, but what they mean goes roughly as follows: a Soviet warship leaves port, generally accompanied by a sister ship and a small oiler. The two warships take turns towing each other (good seamanship practice, and it reduces wear and tear on the engines) to wherever they’re going. They may conduct an underway replenishment (UNREP)—not alongside as we do it, but over the stern, with the oiler towing the de-



USS Stark: Whipping boys are hard to come by, especially the kind required by oath to respect public officials.

Reuters/Bettmann Newsphotos

stroyer—and when they get to where they’re going, they drop their anchors and sit for a month or two, then return home the same way. By comparison, the U.S. Navy generally plows along at 20 knots, and conducts its UNREPs alongside, not uncommonly with an enlisted man in charge. In short, the U.S. Navy spends quite a bit more time actually working than does its Soviet counterpart.

Do the Soviets have good ships—yes, they do. They also have impressive weapons of all categories.

But so do we—though not as many—and we have people operating those ships and weapons who actually know their jobs. The Soviets generally do not.

So, how good are the Soviet armed forces? How good *can* they be? How good would our forces be if we operated under a similar system? How good would our submarines be if their at-sea time was cut by two-thirds? How effective would they be if they didn’t train on their equipment every day? How much confidence would we have in a military in which only officers have professional experience?

Do the Soviets know the disadvantages under which they operate? Any American can subscribe to *Krasnaya Zvezda* (“Red Star”) or *Morskoi Sbornik* (“Naval Digest”), and if you can read Russian, you can see what they say to and about themselves. They know.

Why, then, do the Soviets hamstringing their armed forces, you ask? Think about it for a moment. Soldiers and sailors



Reuters/Bermann Newphotos

**We have people operating ships and weapons who actually know their jobs. The Soviets generally do not.**

the world over are not terribly different. They tend to be loyal to good leaders. If the Soviet military had real professional soldiers, they might start liking the officers over the party leaders . . . perhaps even enough to forget that they're supposed to be loyal to the CPSU . . . and the Soviet Army has a lot of guns . . . and even with the KGB's Third (Military-Oversight) Directorate to keep an eye on things, that worries the Politburo. A truly professional Soviet military might be more of a threat to the CPSU than to NATO.

I must assume that if I can get this information, either from reading it in the open media, or from unclassified conversation with our people in uniform, the same information is available to members of the House and Senate, to all the political lobbies and think tanks, and to the media. Why, then, has the reader probably never seen it in this way?

Defense issues are hard to cover in 10 column inches of a newspaper or 120 seconds of air time. Reporters in particular seem to lack anything resembling expertise in the defense area. (There are a few stellar exceptions, one of whom is John McWethy of ABC.) I have on several occasions offered to show TV journalists how to acquire the sort of knowledge I have—and it is not difficult. I have yet to get a response. Instead, reporters take prepackaged in-

formation, either from the Right or the Left, and merely repeat it.

### **Political Failure**

Our political leadership is also failing. There can be no consensus on defense policy until our political leadership assumes its responsibility of debating—and ultimately answering—the following questions:


What are the threats to America and the West?

What is our national defense strategy to deal with these threats?

What is the mission of the U.S. military?

What do we expect our armed forces to do?

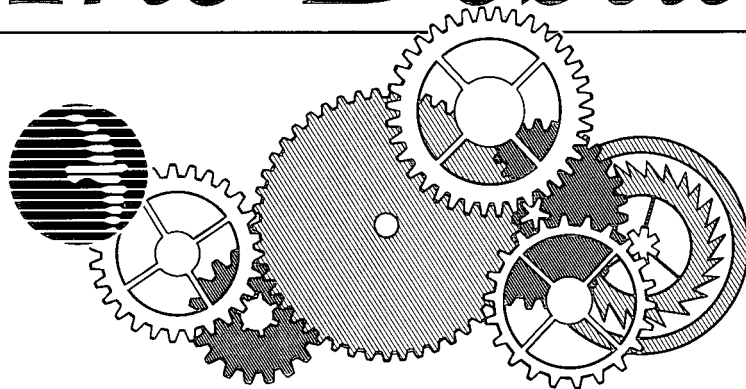
How do we expect them to do it?

A lack of proper answers to these questions is far more dangerous to world peace than the weapons everyone worries about. Wars usually start because one side misperceives the strength and intentions of the other. Overestimation of the enemy can sometimes be as dangerous as underestimation. If we are to assume that wars begin because of faulty or broken-down policy, it's time to ask how we expect to generate good public policy from skewed data, and perhaps to wonder just how dangerous poor data are to world peace. 

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# *Ideas That Drive The Debate*

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# READING AMERICA THE RIOT ACT

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## The Kerner Report And Its Culture of Violence

THOMAS J. BRAY

**M**ost presidential commissions, once they have finished their work, are promptly relegated to the dustbin of history. Their chief purpose is to give the impression of "doing something" about an intractable issue. But their reports are generally unread and their recommendations ignored. Soon nobody remembers that they even existed.

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders—the "Kerner Commission," as it was called after its chairman, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner—seemed destined for a similar fate. The commission was formed in August 1967 to investigate the urban rioting of the mid-1960s. When its report was delivered to President Johnson in March 1968, it was given a cold shoulder by both the White House and Congress. Its recommendations were dismissed as "unrealistic."

Yet the Kerner Commission's work has had a much longer shelf life than most—literally as well as figuratively. Its report sold more than two million copies. And its basic conclusion, that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal," is widely remembered as a prescient forecast of the split between mostly white suburbs and mostly black cities. Moreover, the report's demand for social programs on an "unprecedented scale" gave renewed momentum to the Great Society programs of the Johnson administration. At the time, a consensus had been building that the programs were a failure.

As a result, the Kerner Commission is looked back upon by many as a high-water mark of enlightened liberalism. But a rereading of the report suggests that "conspicuous compassion" (to borrow a phrase from Allan Bloom) would be a more apt description. Those who would celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Kerner Commission report this March need to judge its work not only by its intentions but by its results.

### Settling for Conventional Wisdom

Far from offering fresh or interesting ideas for the future, the Kerner report stitched together most of the fashionable bromides of the time into an expensive wish list of social programs. Underlying the report was a hostility to markets, a patronizing attitude towards blacks, and a dewy-eyed faith in government's ability to "solve" prob-

lems. Perhaps most seriously, it had the effect of diverting attention from the very real problems accumulating in the black community, in particular the breakdown of the black family and growing welfare dependency. But such problems didn't easily fit into the worldview of the Kerner Commission, in which white racism was sufficient to explain the urban problems of the day.

The Kerner Commission had a splendid opportunity to jolt the country into thinking about fresh approaches to some old problems. Instead, it settled for conventional wisdom. Despite the efforts of some, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his 1965 report on "The Negro Family," to raise these issues, a potentially constructive debate was foreclosed for the better part of two decades. Only now is frank discussion of crime, poverty, family, and welfare becoming possible.

The Kerner Commission was appointed by Lyndon Johnson in August 1967 in an atmosphere of crisis. Riots seemed to have become something of a fixture of the city landscape. The Watts upheaval of 1965 was the worst since the Detroit race riot of 1943, in which 35 died. The summer of '66 saw major disturbances in Chicago and Cleveland. The occurrence of more than 150 outbreaks of violence during the summer of 1967, capped by the spectacular riots in Newark and Detroit, seemed to confirm, at least in Washington eyes, that a new form of urban guerrilla warfare was taking hold.

Otto Kerner's dignified bearing and soothing baritone voice made him seem perfect for the role of chairman. (He later went to jail in an Illinois race-track scam.) But by most accounts he did little more than referee. The real activists among the commissioners were Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP; New York Mayor John Lindsay, a silk-stocking Republican; and Senator Fred Harris, the Democratic "populist" from Oklahoma. Lindsay and Harris had presidential ambitions; both undoubtedly saw the commission as a golden opportunity for national exposure.

The whip hand belonged to David Ginsburg, a Washington lawyer who had served in the Office of Price Administration during the war and had worked in the Johnson

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