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Fort Leavenworth and the Eclipse of Nationhood

At Fort Leavenworth, where the Army trains its top brass, captains and colonels study high-tech warfare, read the classics, and ponder what will be left to defend in a transnational world

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

FIFTEEN miles beyond Kansas City the swiftly moving Missouri River -- the untamed emblem of the New World -- makes a wide arc before turning north. On July 2, 1804, the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark camped nearby, en route to the Pacific. In April of 1827, during the presidency of John Quincy Adams, Colonel Henry Leavenworth sailed upriver from St. Louis and here began constructing what would become the advance post of European settlement over the western half of the North American continent. His orders were to build a fort on the east bank of the river. However, because that bank was a flood plain, he built on the bluffs of the west bank, in what was officially "Indian territory" -- outside the Union. By the time the Washington bureaucrats found out, the fort was already a reality.



[Fort Leavenworth](#) is the supreme symbol of what the former Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin calls "the Fertile Verge" of American history. "A verge is a place of encounter between something and something else," Boorstin has written. "The long Atlantic Coast, where early colonial settlement flourished, was . . . a verge between land and sea. Every movement inward into the continent was a verge between the advanced European civilization and the stone-age culture of the American Indians, between people and wilderness." America, Boorstin went on, flourishes on the verge -- of settlement, geography, culture, technology, or history.

Fort Leavenworth has guarded the frontier since 1827. As the most important fort in the West, which sent forth the first group of white people to settle in Indian country under government auspices, Leavenworth became the projection platform for Manifest Destiny. It was the main base for exploration of the Great Salt Lake, in Utah, and the Columbia River, in Oregon; near the starting point of both the Oregon and the Santa Fe Trail; a base camp for the transcontinental railroad. Here a young Illinois man, James ("Wild Bill") Hickok, first entered the West and saw a line of wagon trains as far as the eye could see. From here George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry trekked to the Little Big Horn, and troops marched off to the Mexican War. When the frontier closed, in 1890, Leavenworth began training officers for fighting overseas -- another verge, which arrived in 1898 with the Spanish-American War, when American troops fought in Cuba and the Philippines. Since 1881, when General [William Tecumseh Sherman](#) established an [officers' school at Fort Leavenworth](#), this has been the place where the Army prepares its commanders to "fight the next war." "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Colin Powell, to name but a few generals, were indelibly marked by Leavenworth. A Canadian major told me, "If the British Empire was won on the playing fields of Eton, then Desert Storm was won in the corridors of Fort Leavenworth."

With very few exceptions, the Army's top brass have spent at least several months of their lives -- if not much longer -- here. More than 90 percent of Army captains take a nine-week course at the college, and more than 50 percent of majors spend a year at Leavenworth before they are eligible for promotion to lieutenant colonel; among those majors who eventually make it to general, the percentage is much higher. Leavenworth is where military doctrine is written. Its Foreign Military Studies Office conducts in-depth analyses of foreign adversaries. When the United States intervenes overseas, the phones and computers at Leavenworth work overtime.

Leavenworth's Battle Command Training Program runs simulated war games. One such is [Prairie Warrior](#), an annual \$7 million exercise in which computers link Leavenworth with other U.S. military installations around the world in a virtual-war situation, with isolated command headquarters, battlefield observers, and so forth. This year Prairie Warrior includes a scenario of a hypothetical island continent with great historical and cultural similarities to Europe troubled by a failing nation-state in the "north-central" sector. The nation-state is both threatened by its neighbors and tearing itself apart through civil unrest and guerrilla insurgencies in a densely populated urban area. Because this scenario is set fifteen years in the future (when today's captains and majors will be generals), the weaponry for the war game includes "intelligent mines" that distinguish among trucks, tanks, and people as well as identify the enemy, and Comanche helicopters (now under development) that fly over an extended distance without refueling and carry fiber-optic-guided missiles.

While other military institutions look "strategically" -- and thus more abstractly -- at the future, Leavenworth, because it concentrates on training captains and majors (the middle ranks), "is where the rubber meets the road," Major Chris Devens told me when I visited recently. For instance, forget Republican rhetoric about a unilateral foreign policy. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Adams told me that in just about every circumstance that planners here have looked at -- nuclear meltdowns in Eastern Europe, collapse of a central authority in sub-Saharan Africa, military offensives against drug and crime syndicates, and so on -- the "intervention scenario is international"; the United States will "rarely go it alone anymore." Prairie Warrior assumes "coalition brigades" of French, British, German, and other foreign troops fighting in a "multinational environment," according to Colonel Rolly Dessert, who organizes Prairie Warrior. Of the 1,300 officers participating in Prairie Warrior this year, ninety are from seventy friendly foreign countries.

Colonel Gregory Fontenot, who was a tank commander in Operation Desert Storm, recently ran his students at Leavenworth's School of Advanced Military Studies through two scenarios: a messy and long-term peacekeeping operation in the Caucasus, in which U.S. forces cooperate with the Russian army, and the Turks refuse to let U.S. ships through the Bosphorus Straits; and a humanitarian emergency in Memphis and St. Louis, following a major earthquake along the Mississippi Valley's New Madrid fault line. A series of major quakes occurred here in 1811 and 1812. Another is expected, and buildings in Memphis were not built to withstand major earthquakes. This exercise tested the Army's ability to work with NGOs ("nongovernmental organizations," or private relief agencies), exactly as it has had to do in Rwanda and other places in the Third World.

Civil disorder after the quake was assumed. Many times in the course of my visit I heard discussion of the Posse Comitatus Act, which prevents the National Guard from acting as a local police force once it has been federalized by the Army in a civil emergency. The implication was that turbulence within the United States might one day require repeal of the act. "The future is icky," Lieutenant Colonel Marvin Chandler announced, showing me a picture of a cow, symbolizing the Army, trying to negotiate a series of mud puddles that represent natural

catastrophes, political breakdowns, riots, and nuclear blackmail. By comparison with some of these, Bosnia appears boringly conventional.

Now that technology has bridged distances, Leavenworth is back on the frontier. Its computers disgorge advice to field commanders in Haiti, Rwanda, the Balkans, and wherever else American troops happen to be. "The guy in a tent in Port-au-Prince can access the library here regarding [lessons learned](#) in Somalia," Major Devens told me. Every week officers from Fort Leavenworth fly to hot spots around the world. The kind of geographic considerations that led to the building of Fort Leavenworth and of the nation apply less and less. In planning for future conflicts Fort Leavenworth is helping to redefine the nation by redefining where its borders really are. For example, one captain, looking at a map of a war game in Honduras, told me, "We know more about Honduras than we knew about western Kansas during the Indian Wars. The intelligence on Honduras is denser. Honduras is closer in time than western Kansas was -- a few hours by plane rather than days on horseback. Communications are better too." The Third World is the new frontier.

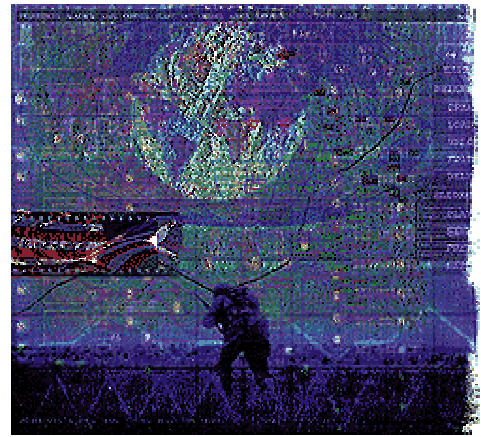
What kind of world will it be, I began to wonder, with Honduras this close and getting closer? Could the dissolving of distances also dissolve the nation? The prairie surrounding Fort Leavenworth focuses the mind on America's continental isolation and its debt to geography. The tensions I encountered inside the fort made me think about whether traditional nation-state America has a future in an age when oceans don't matter.

No More Territory to Conquer

COLONEL Jerry Morelock's walls are cluttered with U.S. military iconography: a dogged Ulysses S. Grant, the father of total, unheroic war, leaning against a tree at City Point; Robert E. Lee after Appomattox; and so on. For a computer screen saver Morelock uses a photo of Eisenhower, George Patton, Omar Bradley, and other generals taken in May of 1945 in Germany, after V-E Day. Morelock, who wears wire-rimmed glasses and has slightly receding gray hair, lives with his family in "the Rookery" -- the oldest house in Kansas, built in 1832. Douglas MacArthur lived there when he was on post in the early 1900s. A typical title on Morelock's bookshelf is *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891*. He salutes the flag every afternoon at five o'clock, he told me.

We talked of recent military history. "Fifty years after V-E Day, the United States has history's strongest military," he said. "But it has been eroded tremendously since 1991. And that is nothing new." Morelock pointed out that following every conflict, including the Revolutionary War (after which the 20,000-man Continental Army was disbanded and replaced by a "regiment" of 700 militiamen), military cutbacks ensued as memory faded. This was true of the periods following not just the First and Second World Wars but also the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American War. "After every war everyone declared the end of war. Though now we talk about lots of smaller wars, what's to prevent a really big conflagration? The record of history indicates that a new and great threat is certain." The task for officers is daunting: imagine being at Leavenworth after 1898, when the United States was flush with victory following its defeat of Spain, and trying to predict Hitler at a time when the words "totalitarianism" and "fascism" were not even used.

Through most of our history we have had not only a weak central government but also a small, volunteer Army; the draft has been a phenomenon of war. The anti-war protests of the Cold War-Vietnam era were not unique. [The Mexican War](#) caused dramatic protests whose pacifist rhetoric could easily be mistaken for that of sixties demonstrations. (The poet Robert Lowell opposed the Vietnam War just as his great-great-uncle, James Russell Lowell, a founder of *The Atlantic Monthly*, opposed the Mexican War.) Even though conscription did not begin until halfway through the Civil War, it sparked riots in New York. The United States, in fact, did not have an adequate standing army until the twentieth century. The Cold War strengthened nation-statism, as typified by a military draft through 1973; its end brought the United States back to its roots as a weakly governed, brawling, fractious society.



Even if U.S. society seems less divided today than in the nineteenth century, two oceans will no longer seal us off from disintegrative forces elsewhere. As nation-states begin the slow, inexorable process of melting into a transnational muck, the U.S. Army must maneuver to help the American nation preserve some semblance of a continental identity. Colonel Morelock worries whether it can succeed.

"Just like at the end of the Indian Wars, in 1890, the Army finds it has no more territory left to conquer," Morelock said. "The answer a hundred years ago was imperialism" in the Philippines, which, however misguided, kept the Army primed to save Europe in both world wars. (In 1935, while the United States was still in an isolationist mood, Eisenhower honed his analytical skills by helping to reorganize the Filipino army.) "For now, we're the world's ~~home~~ one force. The public screams, *Stop those images* -- the ones on TV of kids starving. But that's not necessarily a national interest."

Responding to emergencies is a vocation, though, a temporary *raison d'etre* until the real threat appears -- nuclear war with a renegade Third World state, a rebellion at home, whatever. But even that might not save the "traditional" Army, and what it represents to the nation, because of the way war itself is changing.

A Professional Caste

THE acceleration of technology is driving a wedge between military and civilian societies and bringing about, for the first time, a professional-caste elite. Thus today's volunteer Army is different from all others in our history. Soldiers are becoming like doctors and lawyers -- another professional group we'd like to need less of but upon which we rely more. And just as health reform requires the consent of the medical community, because doctors own a complex body of knowledge, foreign policy will over the decades be increasingly influenced by the military, because war, peacekeeping, famine relief, and the like are becoming too complex for civilian managers.

The most troubling break with the past is [how abstract and technological war is becoming](#). A dictum I heard at Leavenworth was "Attrition of the same adds up to big change." Colonel Thomas Suitt, who runs a command-preparation course, showed me how information-age war will demand leaders -- from lieutenants to Presidents -- who can work their way through dense waves of data to make risky decisions rapidly and constantly.

Suitt' s course simulates tank battles for lieutenant colonels who will have 300-400 vehicles and 5,000 soldiers to lead against similar forces in a "combat window" where all will be decided in fifteen to thirty minutes. "Each of these engagements is bigger and faster than Waterloo," Colonel Suitt explained. "Commanding an armored brigade isn' t brain surgery- it' s tougher." In the days when tank commanders saw only the narrow view from their own tanks, decisions, though often flawed and fatal, were easier to make, because there was less information to process. Now the commander in an M1A2 tank has the electronic capability to map terrain over the horizon and to know the amount of fuel and ammunition left in each of his hundreds of vehicles, the speed and timing of Apache support helicopters above, the location of each "dead zone" (an area between friendly vehicles which none of his tank drivers can see), what wind and temperature patterns will affect how visibility will be obscured by the smoke from exploding shells, and so on. As Suitt ran me through the onscreen battle, displaying all the vehicles and the terrain as combat progressed and asking me what I would do at each stage, I felt as if I were playing multidimensional chess with thirty seconds allowed between moves. More and more information has to be processed with less and less time to reflect.

Suitt' s course is but a taste of what goes on at Leavenworth. Here the term "computerliterate" is meaningless, because one must be computer-sophisticated to function. I thought for a moment about the implications of what he was teaching, drawing on my experience with other branches of the U.S. government in Washington and overseas.

Military influence is growing not only in absolute terms, through the military' s command of complex technologies, but also in relative terms, because of cutbacks in other sectors of the foreign-policy bureaucracy. The technological revolution that has increased the military' s clout in Washington has decreased the State Department' s: advances in global communications deprive diplomats of privilegedfirsthand knowledge, and businesspeople, with their own growing array of resources, require less help from embassies. In fact, embassies may not survive beyond a few more decades. As a modern institution, the embassy came into being in the mid sixteenth century, in the aftermath of a shipbuilding revolution that brought distant places within reach, and it flourished through the modern era of nation-states. But in an age of weakened state authority embassy links between one state and another will be less important.

The inclusion of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in high policy sessions, coupled with reductions in the Foreign Service (the State Department' s diplomatic core), is thus impelled by historical undercurrents far deeper than the Republican victory in 1994. The military, in all but a technical sense, is no longer ordered anywhere. It is a self-interested bureaucracy with the power of negotiation. The United States didn' t go into Bosnia in the early 1990s primarily because the military was reluctant.

Another advantage the military has over the State Department is a disciplined and highly vertical command structure. This limits destabilizing horizontal ambitions more than do civilian bureaucracies, in which, with fewer great causes to struggle for, personal ambition finds fewer legitimate outlets. For example, in an age of two-career couples State is awash with complaints and maneuvering over foreign assignments. There is much less of this in the military, partly because it is less democratic and partly because its culture is more old-fashioned, with the phenomenon of two-career couples less advanced.

Despite perennial bashing by the media, the Central Intelligence Agency may, just like the military, become increasingly influential in the future, perhaps also at the expense of the State Department. Again, technology will be a factor, because the agency has access to an ever-greater range of electronically obtained information that

necessitates human analysis. Moreover, a fractured, borderless world full of illicit drugs, plutonium smugglers, and organized crime will require a greater quantity of human intelligence to preserve security against eroding physical borders. "A nuclear detonation in the atmosphere that is not a test is probable in the next ten to fifteen years," Roger Spiller, the George C. Marshall Professor of Military History at Leavenworth, told me, "if only because groups, as well as rogue states, will be acquiring the technology without also acquiring the diplomatic skills and bureaucratic control mechanisms for keeping a nuke without miscalculating." The best way to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of the wrong people is human penetration: spies will in effect become border guards. Liberals, then, face another defeat: the very institutions they loathe are precisely the ones that will become more powerful -- the military and the CIA.

The professional-caste quality of the Army emerges in many ways. The growing use of technical jargon and acronyms at Leavenworth to accompany the growth of technology and military specialties has created an insiders' patois all but incomprehensible to the uninitiated. Foreign territory is referred to as OCONUS ("outside the continental United States"), humanitarian and peacekeeping duties are called OOTW ("operations other than war," pronounced *ootwa*), the post library is CARL ("combined arms research library"), the technological revolution in the military is the RMA ("revolution in military affairs"), and so on. Also significant is the level of scholarship. At Leavenworth men and women in their late twenties through early forties devour ancient history and related subjects.

Robert Epstein, a military historian, followed me out of his office, lecturing me. "Ancient history has everything. There is nothing that can ever happen that won't have an echo from the classical past." He explained how the immigration of German tribes led to tensions with the native Romans and abetted the breakup of the Roman world. A subgroup of Germans, the Visigoths, fled into the empire in the late fourth century A.D. to escape other barbarian tribes. Not satisfied with how the Romans treated them, the Visigoths eventually rose against the very state that had given them refuge. Filling much of the vacuum created as the imperium disintegrated was Christianity -- a radical and intolerant counterpart to dignified, aristocratic paganism. The early Christians, Epstein went on, won the debate over values partly by choking the debate off -- the Christians were able successfully to characterize the other side's arguments as immoral, or incorrect. Thus intimidation kept people from saying what they really thought.

The eclectic reading at Leavenworth includes military writers such as Antoine Henri Jomini, Karl von Clausewitz, and Frederick the Great. Because many officers are late bloomers intellectually, they attack books with an urgency unknown on an Ivy League campus. During the Cold War the Foreign Service fancied itself the elite government bureaucracy. The military may yet claim that mantle for the new age. Army captains and majors, to say nothing of the higher ranks, evince a historical sensibility that could be declining in the Foreign Service and that the media, with notable exceptions, lack. "The electronic media," one major sneers, are "about *now, now, now*, with all the depth of a credit card." To mention Haiti here is to elicit a detailed report on that country's troubles since independence from France, in 1804. Mention Rwanda and you hear about ethnic violence from the late 1950s through the 1970s. The same with the Balkans. Whenever, in the course of various lectures I delivered here, I brought up the possibility of U.S. military intervention in Bosnia, my own writings (and those of others) about that region's fractious history were thrown back at me. Here historical precedent rules. Officers study previous battles and interventions, and the political circumstances surrounding them, the way law students study torts. The underlying message is that knowledge of the past helps foresight, and those with foresight accrue power.

If the future holds smaller wars with less meaning for the rest of us, this will widen the gap between the military and society. Neither we nor the military want this to happen. But the current era is driven by an unprecedented accumulation of knowledge, which encourages the division of society into subgroups with their own journals, social networks, and obsessions. These subgroups are like lonely travelers who bump into other travelers -- other subgroups -- in superficial encounters. Why should the military be any different? Officers at Leavenworth read *The Economist* and *Foreign Affairs*, and watch the *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*, but that doesn't mean they interpret the information the way civilian policymakers and people in the media do. However sophisticated the reading lists, many of the people doing the reading here come from rural, blue-collar America. As soldiers, they live in materially poor conditions, especially compared with people who spend their lives in the affluent Washington suburbs. The fact that so many military bases are, like Leavenworth, in the Midwest or the South further isolates them from the sensibilities of coastal metropolitan elites. "It matters less what you read than where you live and where you come from, because that determines how you interpret what you read," Major Susan P. Kellett-Forsyth, one of the first female graduates of West Point, told me.

A New Manifest Destiny

JUST as the military is separating from society and civilian government, it is also separating from the media -- which might influence it most of all. Inside a nondescript one-story building near the post cemetery Colonel Theodore Milton Jr., a fluent Russian-speaker who once commanded an infantry battalion in Berlin, was talking on the phone about an upcoming conference in Moscow about the problem of organized crime. When I arrived, he called in a group of majors and civilian researchers who spoke to me of "gray-area" (nonconventional) threats such as diseases, floods, and computer networks (the Zapatistas, in Chiapas, raise money in the United States through the Internet, I was told). The media were also considered to be a potential threat. "Yeah, the media could gray out on us," one major muttered offhandedly. He was not alone in this view.

Journalists and soldiers have been at odds for a long time. The media's effect on policy is not new either. The newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst, encouraging the artist Frederic Remington to champion Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain, said, "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." The Spanish-American War soon followed. What has changed is scale. The media are now electronic and worldwide, and, as we are repeatedly told, they cover warfare in real time. Like the military's, the media's power in Washington and elsewhere has grown at the expense of civilian government's, only much more so. "What do you hate most about the Pentagon?" I asked a number of officers at Leavenworth. Time and again the reply came, "Talking to a general who's not listening to you because he's looking over your shoulder at CNN, worried about what conflict [the war correspondent] Christiane Amanpour might drag us into." Army officers and war correspondents may all be students of Balkan and Persian Gulf conflict, but even if their information is similar, their goals are different.

Whereas soldiers often come from small, parochial communities to discover a nation, foreign correspondents more often come from cosmopolitan backgrounds to discover the wider world. "The military," Major Kellett-Forsyth told me, "is in the nation-state world. The media represents the postmodern, or transnational world. Overseas,

[U.S. soldiers] sit down with each other. The American media sits down with foreign journalists: that' s its socialization group."

And, of course, the American media are becoming less American, as Britons and others infiltrate their ranks. CNN epitomizes an emerging electronic life-form that is slowly becoming the eyes and ears of the world community. Members of the media, particularly foreign correspondents, are becoming what Mitchell Cohen, an editor at *Dissent*, calls "rooted cosmopolitans" -- people with several loyalties, standing "in many circles, but with common ground" in the form of a home base. Cohen' s description evokes the turn-of-the-century essayist Randolph Bourne' s idea of a transnational America- of multiple-passport holders and dual citizens.

A new Manifest Destiny, in other words: We strip the world of its human ingenuity, attracting the most talented Asians, Africans, and so on to the United States. We anglicize them. Although they are not loyal to the degree that former immigrants were, they accept America as their base. We become the place where all the world' s major cultures and economies meet, conquering the world as it conquers us. Blood-and-soil nationalism recedes.

Given that American politics has often been a series of peaceful evolutions, we may be in the midst of a transition so gradual that it cannot fit within the confines of the news. It will be apparent only after it happens. Tom Nairn, a social scientist, writes that nationalism is "an inwardly-determined social necessity, a ' growthstage,' located somewhere in between . . . ' feudal societies' and a future where the factors of nationality will become less prominent." America, more than any other nation, may have been born to die.

The media could be ahead of this curve, the Army behind it, as the modern world of sharply defined nation-states dies an excruciatingly slow death. Whereas the media lead us into the transnational world, the Army fights back and adapts. "The parameters of what the American military can do have narrowed because of the media," Colonel Morelock told me. Karen Wilhelm, an Air Force officer (a number of officers from the other services attend courses here), said, "The media sets too high a standard. If a few soldiers are killed or wounded, the media judges the whole operation a failure. Because of the media, the only conflicts we' ll be able to enter are those we can win easily." Another officer lamented, "We can' t fight the Serbs the way we fought the Indians- we' re too restricted now."

Might this be blaming the media for what has come to be referred to as the Powell doctrine? As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell delineated a policy of intervening only where victory seemed certain, and certain to be quick. Thus we fought in the Persian Gulf and fed the starving for a while in Somalia, but did virtually nothing to stop a war that threatens to undermine the stability of post-Communist Europe -- a war in which a million people were driven from their homes and as many as 200,000 killed in situations that resembled the Nazi Holocaust. Or did Powell, through his experience in Vietnam, merely divine what would be tolerated by a public informed of every mistake and gory detail of war?

Nationhood is nourished by blood and strife, risk and deep meaning -- not by ease of operation. Ease of operation in a media-dominated age represents a military interest more than a national one, indicative of the military' s increased power as a technocratic caste. Under a government of technocrats, the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz has written, "society would progress with greater efficiency but without aim." The Powell doctrine, by swerving so hard to avoid future Vietnams, also avoids the great, meaningful -- and, of course, risky -- actions that might restore old-fashioned national identity. The Powell doctrine mirrors the narrowing parameters set by the

media. Complaining about the media may thus be, in the words of one person at Leavenworth, just another sign of "cultural despair."

The Core of Nationhood

EAST Coast monuments like the Lincoln Memorial and the Statue of Liberty speak specifically to ideals. Fort Leavenworth, built where the prairie meets the Great Plains, invokes blood and soil. Notice how the British historian John Keegan, in *Six Armies in Normandy*, sets the scene for the American roots of D-Day. Leavenworth, he writes, is

one of the most sacred places of the army' s emotional geography, holier than Battle Monument at West Point or the eternal flame at Arlington National Cemetery, where . . . on the bluff above the Missouri still scarred by the abandoned Oregon-Santa Fe trail, stands the tiny memorial chapel of the regiments which fought for the frontier in the Indian wars. . . . It is there in the low-eaved gloom, between the cannon barrels which serve as pillars to the roof, among the slips of commemorative marble to scalped subalterns, that the American officer reminds himself of the days of ' real soldiering' ; days when men . . . rode all day to the musical creak of the McClellan saddle. . . . It is the shrine of those Indian-fighting troopers whom Frederick Remington has immortalized in paint for the American nation.

One day I stood inside the darkened holy of holies that Keegan describes, and felt as if I were inside the core of nationhood. The memorial chapel was built of local limestone in 1878, two years after the massacre of Custer' s soldiers. Six brass howitzers from the Indian wars are embedded in the wall. In addition to plaques commemorating the Army dead at Little Big Horn and other frontier engagements, the walls are studded with the names of heroes of every war since, among them Colonel Ollie Reed (July 30, 1944) and First Lieutenant Ollie Reed Jr. (July 5, 1944) -- father and son killed weeks apart in France and Italy in the Second World War.

Outside, the sunlight burned off the late-morning mist. As much as it is an Army base, or a war college, Fort [Leavenworth is a living museum](#). Late-eighteenth-century French cannons, from the days before President Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory from France, look out over the Missouri River. Lining the parade ground are red-brick Victorian houses with white-frame porticoes. Custer lived in one, MacArthur in another. In nearby [Otis Hall](#), in 1926, when Fort Leavenworth was already a hundred years old, Eisenhower lived with his family. Leavenworth is where Ike learned to play golf. In another brick building, in the winter of 1917-1918, a young officer, F. Scott Fitzgerald, wrote the first draft of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. President Abraham Lincoln designated [the post cemetery](#) one of the first twelve national military cemeteries. It holds the graves of more than 19,000 soldiers who served from the War of 1812 through Desert Storm, including those of Shango Hango, an Indian soldier; four officers from Little Big Horn; and a casualty from Fort Sumter. Fifteen hundred of the graves are unmarked.

The *piece de resistance* is the [Buffalo Soldier](#) Monument, a sixteen-foot-high bronze statue of a black trooper mounted on his horse, rearing up before two reflecting pools. The "buffalo soldiers" were [two African-American regiments](#), the 9th and 10th Cavalries, who from the end of the Civil War through the closing of the western frontier escorted cattle drives and wagon trains, installed telegraph lines, and fought Native Americans and Mexican revolutionaries. The monument was dedicated in 1992. The idea for it originated with Colin Powell

when he was deputy commander here, in 1981-1982. The bronze horse and rider have a baroque magnificence, as though leaping out of a Remington oil painting. Families and other small groups stroll by it reverentially, and they may be white or black -- in contrast to Gettysburg, Williamsburg, and Monticello, where visitors are overwhelmingly white. It is a binding icon, new and necessary.

Inside the post buildings the theatricality demanded by tradition deepens. The pictures lining the corridors range from the Revolutionary War general Nathanael Greene to Douglas MacArthur striding ashore in the Philippines in 1944. In a varnished-wood boardroom with a plush red carpet officers dressed in black boots and battle fatigues discuss future war scenarios in the Balkans, Central America, and Africa. Dress greens or jacket and tie are worn at the other war colleges. But Leavenworth is a frontier post still. A nostalgic view of the United States is deliberately cultivated here. What Tom Nairn calls "the modern Janus" certainly applies to Leavenworth. Recalling the "Roman god, Janus, who stood above gateways with one face looking forward and one backwards," Nairn writes, "Thus does nationalism stand over the passage to modernity. . . . As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of ' development.' "

Global Reconstruction?

WHEREAS the public, particularly the liberal public that watches public television, harks back to the Civil War and the Second World War, when slavery and fascism were the enemies, the Army's defining moment, as I repeatedly heard at Leavenworth, was fighting the "Indians." The very location of Army bases in the heartland is a legacy of the Indian wars. Not only Fort Leavenworth but also other bases, such as Fort Riley and Fort Hays, in Kansas, and Fort Sill, in Oklahoma, were originally frontier posts. A popular book here is *Five Years a Dragoon*, by Percival G. Lowe, a nostalgic memoir of Indian operations on the Great Plains between the Mexican and Civil Wars and of "the bivouac under the blue sky." "The Indian plains beyond Fort Riley have been replicated in all the wars we've fought since: World War Two, Desert Storm, Somalia," Jerry Morelock explained to me. "In our minds we're still the cavalry. But that will end. We're not at the full techwar stage yet, but we will be. All indications, demographic and otherwise, are that the future of war is urban. Patriotism, tied to a romantic vision of the land, will be harder to sustain."

The possibility notwithstanding of another great war in coming decades, the near term, according to what people here told me, offers the uninspiring and clinical vision of small, increasingly urban wars and rescue details that will have less and less meaning for the nation. "In the future the shelf life of victory will be short," said Roger Spiller, the military-history professor. "Military operations will proliferate but mean less." Like lower economic-growth rates, these smaller deployments will represent a departure from our history, which through the Second World War was driven by a major war every few decades. (If anyone believes that major wars have not been crucial for our nationhood, consider how few patriotic songs and national holidays we would have without them. True, we might be happier from now on without great military struggles -- but whatever we will have become will not be a nation in the traditional sense.)

New restrictions on warfare have resulted in a greater emphasis on "operations other than war": humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, hurricane and disaster relief, counter-drug operations, and so on. The Army has

throughout its history been involved in such efforts -- the Tennessee Valley project in the 1930s, for instance, and the campaign to eradicate yellow fever in the Panama Canal Zone at the beginning of the twentieth century. But, again, the scale has changed. The percentage of people in combat units is lower than ever: fewer than 10 percent of the troops take 95 percent of the casualties. The tendencies toward noncombat activities and technology-driven professionalization feed on each other. There may be no way out. Soldiers will become "security providers." Though many civilians feel more comfortable with an Army that engages in humanitarian relief, people still join the Army, as Colonel Morelock told me, "to fight, to be soldiers." This disparity increases their sense of frustration and, occasionally, despair. One major said, "Others can provide hurricane relief, but who's going to be trained to kill when the next big one comes?"

Perhaps the best use of the Army that can be hoped for is what Jim Schneider, a professor of military theory at Leavenworth, calls "global reconstruction." The post-Civil War South is its paradigm. As we inherited the problems of the South after the Civil War, we inherited the problems of the world after the Cold War. We hunt down bad guys (terrorists, drug lords) over a devastated world landscape the way the Army hunted down the early brigades of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1870s. We succeeded in absorbing the South into an industrialized America in the twentieth century; we may, of course, fail to absorb Russia and other places into the post-industrialized West in the twenty-first. But we will have had our moments of glory now and again, sufficient to create useful service myths and sharpen a blurring national identity. The Second World War mystique of the 10th Mountain Division, for example, is being amplified by post-Cold War relief operations.

Because, as I kept hearing, "the intervention scenario is international," we will eventually lead an "international constabulary" for these punitive expeditions. This constabulary might begin with the United States, Great Britain, and France -- as the European Union began with a Franco-German coal-and-steel community. Republicans need not worry; if this constabulary uses the mantle of the United Nations, it will do so merely as an afterthought and a diplomatic contrivance. Leavenworth has a long history of training foreign officers from allied armies. American officers here regularly and enthusiastically discuss operations with their counterparts from Britain, Canada, Turkey, Chile, and so on. What the American officers have no tradition -- or use -- for is running operations through an international civilian bureaucracy like the UN. "If we have to fight in Bosnia, we'll fight," one colonel told me. "I just don't want some BoutrosBoutros bureaucrat telling us we can hit that outpost but not the other one." (Indeed, the military has written the rules for our current Balkan policy: where troops are deployed, it has wide freedom to act, even if the mission itself is very limited.)

Last Redoubt of the Nation-State?

GLOBAL reconstruction, or something like it, is more a description -- and a rationalization -- of what we are already halfheartedly doing than a cause behind which Americans will ever rally. Many parts of the world cannot be saved, and the voters instinctively know it. We may have run out of foreign causes that can buttress our own nationhood. Fighting faceless plutonium smugglers, high birth rates in Africa, and tropical-disease pandemics, although clearly worthwhile, will not engender drum-beating patriotism the way fighting Hitler did. Sure, there are always domestic causes to rally the nation -- but for the most part they are best handled as sudden crises. A protracted deterioration involving crime, family life, class divisions, and so on is hard to halt, and easy to deny.

It was with such lugubrious thoughts that I listened to a number of round-table discussions at Leavenworth. In one a group of majors lamented the end of the draft. "People who want the draft back are hankering after a lost golden age," Major Robert Everson said. "The draft is obsolete because of the way warfare is changing. War has become so technological that it takes too long to train people who will only serve for a year or two." The talk switched to Oklahoma City. A Marine in the group, Major Craig Tucker, said, "The minute I heard about Oklahoma City, I knew who did it -- rednecks, the kind of guys from southern Idaho." I had heard similar remarks. The finger-pointing at Middle Eastern Muslims immediately after the blast, while predictable on the basis of past events, reflected a coastal preoccupation with foreign policy and also an ignorance of social upheavals in the heartland, for which people in the military, quite a number of whom are from blue-collar backgrounds, have antennae. Tucker and another officer suggested that "a time may come when the military will have to go domestic" -- as when George Washington put down the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania, in 1794. During another discussion a visiting Canadian officer said, "The biggest threat to Canada is the United States collapsing on itself. Canada's problems are out in the open, but the degree of turmoil in the United States is not admitted." Canadians have always sneered at the "disorderly" United States; I noticed that protests from the American officers were muted.

These discussions were remarkable for their intensity. Quotations from books, pointed aphorisms, and Latin phrases came at me like machine-gun fire. "The Athenian oracle said the Persians would be defeated by ' wooden walls,' which meant the Athenian navy. That's the kind of riddle we have to solve." "Remember Heisenberg's rule: one who engages in foresight alters the future by the choices he makes." Because this physical and intellectual elite is rather poorly paid and lives in Spartan conditions, there is something monastic about it: it is a last redoubt of the nation-state at which the transnational world can gawk. Here national life is lived and nurtured with new sustaining myths, like that of the buffalo soldiers.

Nothing lasts forever. We might have gone on becoming more meanly and divisively nationalistic, urged on by those like Father Coughlin, had Hitler and Tojo not saved us. Officers at Leavenworth have been clairvoyant in the past -- training for overseas operations before the Spanish-American War and the First World War. The talk of nuclear explosions, urban warfare, and civil disorder at home raises the question What will the future map of our continent look like?

I wondered if this map might one day look like the map of Europe after Rome fell. A hundred years before its fall Rome was a world power, defended by a mighty military. Growing ethnic diversity -- a strength for so long -- eventually helped to undermine Rome. As it entered its final century, the empire was a place of decaying cities, a threatened middle class, terrorists, and lawyers who paralyzed government through unending legal challenges. The classicist Michael Grant wrote in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* that the configurations of settlement of the Visigoths and other immigrant minorities within the Roman Empire "formed an important part of the process by which the ancient world gradually developed the new national patterns characteristic of the Middle Ages." From one undivided polity came many smaller ones.

Inverting Geography

TO many of us, geography means a grade-school social-studies course, or perhaps a "triptik" published by the American Automobile Association. The study of geography as a serious discipline has declined in recent decades. But geography is nothing less than the social, environmental, and political implications of humanity's interaction with the landscape. (The rise of political science at geography's expense shows how unreal and abstract the study of nations and international politics has become.) As officers at Fort Leavenworth who deal with Honduran insurgencies and Russian organized crime know, distances are collapsing. But that doesn't mean that geography will cease to matter. Geography could become our enemy -- the means by which Asia and Europe overtake us in world importance, through the collapse of certain distances and the conceptual lengthening of others. I will explain.

Daniel Boorstin and Aldous Huxley observed that whereas Europe is a land with far too much history and not enough geography, America has little history and plenty of geography. This idea complements Bernard DeVoto's point in *The Course of Empire* that no continent has been so perfectly appointed to nation-building as North America. The Appalachians provided a western boundary for a nascent community of states through the end of the eighteenth century, and river valleys like the Mohawk and the Ohio later allowed for western penetration by settlers. Beyond the Appalachians the settlers found a flat panel of rich farmland without geographical impediments where, in the nineteenth century, human differences could be ground down to a distinctive American culture. By the time westering pioneers reached a truly daunting barrier -- the deserts to both the east and the west of the Rocky Mountains -- technology had advanced to the level of the transcontinental railroad. America was thus founded in a state of nature. Our self-government, Frederick Jackson Turner, Boorstin, and others remind us, evolved not from ideology, as in Europe, but from the early settlers' encounters with the landscape.

Though [the frontier](#) closed a hundred years ago, as Turner said, the ocean and its vast size mattered for decades afterward. Until recently oceans secured for us a large internal market and protected America from the physical devastation of the Second World War, allowing for the climax of the American Century in the late 1940s and the 1950s. (Americans, unlike most Asians and Europeans, have not seen a major sustained war on their soil since 1865.)

Now we have essentially lost the benefit of our geography. Because our nation has been so overwhelmingly a creature of geography, in the twenty-first century the loss of distance will unravel us more than it will our competitors, who never required splendid continental isolation for their social and national development. Still, within the continent, at least, the sense of great space remains. As the world creeps nearer and economic borders further crumble, such space might come to mean the opposite of what it used to.

The region near Fort Leavenworth is a case in point. The town of Leavenworth -- the oldest in Kansas -- is, like the fort, a museum piece. Because of the influence of the elite military institution, the town, with a population of 36,000, is harmoniously multiracial to a degree that few other places in the country are. A town-council member I met told me happily that Leavenworth is "twenty years behind the curve in social change." Here is an older America of low brick buildings and sidewalks, and a succession of streets named for Native American tribes with whom the Army negotiated treaties: Cheyenne, Pawnee, Seneca. Whereas Leavenworth boasted a hundred mom-and-pop stores thirty years ago, though, the downtown is now failing -- a victim of big chain stores and the regional shopping mall. Crime, too, has appeared, and in the early 1990s the town saw a spate of murders.

Travel a few miles in any direction and the deeper story emerges. Kansas City, Missouri, like other American metropolises, is slowly dying -- slowly separating out into economic and racial enclaves that have little in common with one another even as some of them have increasingly much in common with Asia and Europe. The "new" Kansas City is growing up around Overland Park and nearby cities in Johnson County, Kansas, a booming, predominantly white, high-income and high-technology area. Johnson County is forming an axis of cultural commonality with up-and-coming Lawrence, forty minutes away to the west, the site of the University of Kansas. In Lawrence the main street is a succession of fashionable clothing stores. This new "Kansas City area" is just another place. As economic and geographic space widens between rich and poor, in Johnson County and Lawrence other distinctions blur, and what remains is cappuccino, French pastries, and designer seafood in the midst of the prairie, and European-style clothes produced in Asia. True, the worldliness is at the same time distinctively midwestern. Big smiles, free drinks while you wait for a table, huge food portions, a lack of subtlety in new building interiors and clothing combinations -- all evince a dynamic, striving element that midwestern cities have always had. But such localisms are increasingly elusive. What is perhaps easier to notice is the growing similarity between the new Kansas City and upstart Asian cities that have unapologetically embraced global materialism. If the comparison seems a bit forced, it will seem less so as the years roll on.

Johnson County is transnational, whereas the poorer parts of Kansas City are stuck in the world of the nation-state -- at least to the extent that the nation-state, to use the business guru Kenichi Ohmae's definition, is increasingly a device for the subsidy and protection of the economically weaker elements of our population, be they inner-city blacks or blue-collar whites threatened by competition from abroad. History could progress to the point where the affluent of Johnson County want as little contact with the restrictions of the nation-state as they now want with the military. For an increasing percentage of the middle and upper classes, the nation-state, with its taxes, welfare programs, and the like, is becoming an impediment in a global economy.

Because of America's very size, the affluent can simply move farther and farther away from the poor, rather than spend tax dollars on social programs that may or may not work. Our geography makes this possible. That is why the Democrats -- the party of the poor, fighting this trend -- constitute the real nationalists, and why the breakup of the Democratic Party, much more than that of the Republican Party, would herald the end of nation-state America, at least in its traditional form.

We are back to the individualism of Colonel Leavenworth, building his fort where he thought fit. This time individualism will not construct but deconstruct a polity: as new Visigothic settlement patterns forge aggregations of communities around the world, linked by jets and computers, traditional nation-states like ours, linked mainly by geography, will continue to weaken. Nineteenth-century "print capitalism," with its local newspapers and manufacturing centers, originally formed the basis of our nationhood. But in a computer-driven, knowledge-based world economy, educated Americans will have more in common with (and, ultimately, more loyalty to) their highly educated friends and counterparts in Europe and Asia than they do with less educated fellow Americans who happen to share their geographic space. This medievalization of the continent can be compared to the period before the birth of the nation-state in North America, when the land was peopled by Native Americans, Spanish settlers, and isolated Pilgrim communities.

Infrastructure like airports and roads will have to be refurbished, if only to link places like Johnson County and Lawrence. But in the future that may be done by private capital, domestic and foreign -- whatever "foreign" may

eventually come to mean. Like "embassy," "foreign" could someday connote a distant and romantic age, when cultures were distinct and colorful, like the countries on the map, rather than the gruel they will have become at the upper end of the world economic spectrum, and the uncompromising sludge they will have become at the bottom.

As technology and capital continue to weld together the affluent parts of the world, Johnson County will be brought closer to Singapore and Milan and pushed further away from the neighborhoods of poorer Americans who can't cope in the transnational world. As the scholar Paul A. Rahe writes in *Republics Ancient and Modern*, "For human beings interested chiefly in what Thomas Hobbes once called 'commodious living,' the establishment of great states on extended territories . . . [is a matter] of little concern." Rahe's point is that as private life becomes more fulfilling and varied because of material gains and technological advances, interest in public life outside one's class and immediate community gets pushed aside. Given enough time, patriotism will wane, with Earth Day more symbolic for the wealthier half than the Fourth of July. (The Pledge of Allegiance may ultimately become a pathology, as it already is among certain militia groups.) The culmination of Fort Leavenworth's history may arrive on the day when the officers sit around their wooden conference tables, with Nathanael Greene, Douglas MacArthur, and other warriors of old looking down from the walls, and argue about what it is -- and who it is -- they are supposed to defend.

Nationalism, writes Anthony D. Smith, a professor at the London School of Economics, emerged "out of the breakdown of earlier religious forms of culture." As nationalism weakens, do religious and other forms of identity return? Jacksonian democracy, the Civil War, and the New Deal are examples of America's resurrecting itself. But as American society becomes more complex and interwoven with other societies, the odds for future reinventions of the nation-state get longer. Our reduced economic-growth rate -- 2.3 percent yearly since 1973, as opposed to 3.4 percent yearly from 1870 to 1973 -- indicates the harsh reality of a shrunken world in which the United States no longer has its large market to itself and American workers must compete with lower-paid counterparts elsewhere.

Of course, the grim picture I have drawn could be turned on its head to yield the Mitchell Cohen-Randolph Bourne vision of an America of "rooted cosmopolitans," reinventing itself in a larger world by becoming an international nation (and the home base of a value-driven international constabulary) where the best and the brightest of all the continents come to live, if only for six or eight months a year. Edward Gibbon, the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, believed that a decentralized and pluralistic society with a highly mobile citizenry might survive forever. The reductions in military expenditures after each war are an example of how America renews itself by deliberately weakening the center in order to remain vibrant at the edges -- as opposed to the Oriental and late-Roman models, which had despotism at the center and weakness at the extremities.

Matt Nowak is Fort Leavenworth's forester. "America is also soil, geology, ecosystem," he told me. "I teach the military literally what it is supposed to defend." He held in his hand a clump of loess -- loamy soil kept in place by prairie grass since the last Ice Age. He pointed out a stand of old-growth pecan trees that have lined the Missouri River since before Lewis and Clark. The nineteenth-century New England poet William Cullen Bryant wrote that "prairie" -- suggestive as it is, with that long first syllable, of an "encircling vastness" -- is a quintessential American word (albeit of French origin) "for which the speech of England has no name." More important, it is a

vastness signifying union. Walking with Nowak along the great curve of the river near the fort, lined by sycamores and cottonwoods, amid fields of tall grass, ragweed, and sunflowers, I wondered what, precisely, the sound of that word will suggest to future inhabitants of the continent.

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