**Medium Armored Vehicles**

**Mobility and Versatility Will be New Focus of Armored Units**

**Army Shifts Strategies on Vehicles**
by Thomas E. Ricks and Roberto Suro

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After decades of reliance on tanks, the Army plans to equip its newest armored units with lighter vehicles that move on wheels, a radical departure that reflects the Army's changing missions and has generated intense controversy inside the service, senior military and civilian officials said yesterday.

THE DECISION may be announced as early as Friday, following notification of congressional leaders and final clearance by top Defense Department officials. The "Medium Armored Vehicles" will go to a model brigade formed earlier this year as the centerpiece of the Army's effort to leave the Cold War behind and transform itself into a force than can rush to trouble spots within days rather than weeks or months.

The embrace of wheeled vehicles comes after more than a year of contentious deliberations on the Army's future and involves much more than just a new piece of equipment. It will require changes in the way the Army trains, deploys and fights. Rather than preparing primarily for an all-out land war, as it did during the Cold War, the Army is reshaping itself to engage in numerous smaller conflicts, peacekeeping missions and humanitarian relief assignments.

Supporters in the Army leadership describe the choice of a wheeled armored vehicle as a historic step comparable to the advent of the battleship and the machine gun, which revolutionized warfare in their time. Critics, who abound in the Army, especially in tank units, contend that soldiers' lives will be in danger without the firepower and protection provided by heavy tanks.

At an Army meeting last month, Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, the service's chief of staff, bluntly called for an end to the dissension. "If you chose not to get on board, that's okay, but then get out of the way," he said.

The selection reverses a half-century trend in which the Army, since adopting the tank between the two world wars, has bought ever bigger and heavier armored vehicles. Today's M-1A2 Abrams tank is considered almost unbeatable in open terrain - such as the plains of central Germany for which it was designed - but at 70 tons is so heavy that it cannot be transported quickly to most parts of the world and cannot cross small bridges or maneuver on narrow roads in places such as Kosovo.

Although the old Army, built around heavy-tank formations, proved its value in the Gulf War, "over the last 10 years the change in the strategic environment has required us to flex to meet additional demands," Shinseki said last month.

NEW STANDARDS

The Army's requirements for the new vehicles set the maximum weight at 19 tons to ensure that they can be carried by the Air Force's smallest and most common transport plane, the C-130. In the inevitable trade-off, the Army gave up some of the protection provided by heavy armor plating and the all-terrain capabilities of tank treads.

The new vehicles will come in a dozen variations, including an infantry carrier, a tank-like mobile gun system, a reconnaissance vehicle and a computer-laden mobile headquarters. By using a common chassis for all those variants, the Army hopes to trim the tons of logistical support and crowds of mechanics now required to keep mechanized units running.

The Army's new "medium-weight brigade" is being designed around just three basic types of vehicles - the wheeled armored vehicle, the Jeep-like Humvee and a military truck - compared with about a dozen in the service's current armored units.

More than 300 of the wheeled armored vehicles will be bought for the new combat brigade that was created over the past year at Fort Lewis, Wash. That brigade is supposed be declared operational - that is, ready to take on a real-world mission - in a little over a year.

Ultimately, five more similarly-equipped brigades are to follow, for a total purchase by the Army of roughly 3,000 vehicles at a cost of about $2.5 million each, or about $7.5 billion altogether, a Pentagon official said.

QUICK DEPLOYMENT

The new units are designed to be able to move anywhere in the world in 96 hours. That's a far cry from the agonizingly slow movement of "Task Force Hawk," a unit of Army helicopters and missile batteries that was sent to Albania during last year's Kosovo campaign but that never actually engaged in combat. Another incident that helped spur the formation of the new, medium-weight unit was a firefight in Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993 in which 18 U.S. troops were killed, some as they awaited a rescue mission that was delayed because the Army did not have any armored vehicles in the area.

The Army does not plan to do away with its monster main battle tanks just yet, but will keep them ready for conflicts with a major adversary, such as Iraq, whose heavy tanks could outgun the medium-weight brigades.

Starting in about 2010, the Army hopes to start fielding high-tech weaponry that has yet to be invented. It wants something as light as the wheeled vehicles but as durable and powerful as today's tanks. The Army's future vehicles are likely to be armored with ceramics rather than metal and may be armed with some sort of electric gun rather than a conventional cannon. But the battlefield tactics for this futuristic Army will be developed by the medium-weight brigades equipped with the newly selected wheeled vehicles.

SUPPORT GROWS, SLOWLY

Congressional reaction to the new vehicle appears to be generally supportive. "I don't see any problems," said Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee. Even so, there is some nervousness at the Pentagon about how Capitol Hill will react, in part because of the influence of companies that make tanks and other tracked vehicles.

In addition, the Marine Corps has watched with some concern over the past year as the Army has become more like the Corps, creating lighter, expeditionary units. Officially, the Marines have been supportive of the Army's transformation plan. But in private conversations, Marine officers sometimes make comments such as, "We don't need two Marine Corps."

Another wild card is the presidential election. Texas Gov. George W. Bush vowed on the campaign trail to push the military to adapt to the post-Cold War world much faster than it has over the past decade. Richard Armitage, one of Bush's defense advisers, indicated in an interview yesterday that if the Republican candidate becomes president, he might want to review the Army's new direction.

While "Bush has made transformation a major element of his defense program," Armitage said, American history also makes it clear that "militaries should not be in charge of their own transformations."

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