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Why U.S. Steers Clear Of a Fight in Asia

General Ridgway, holding that the foot soldier still is war's decisive factor, argues that his Army is not strong enough to support intervention in Asia. President Eisenhower backs him.

THE JOINT CHIEFS: Generals Twining and Ridgway; Admirals Radford and Carney

AS OF TODAY, one man virtually holds a veto on whether the U.S. shall or shall not go to war in Asia. That man is Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, Chief of Staff of the Army. General Ridgway believes his Army is too weak to justify such a venture. And President Eisenhower backs him, even over the combined protests of the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Army has been cut back heavily since its 1953 Korean-war peak. It still has commitments to fill, not just in Asia but the world around. Besides, General Ridgway sticks to the infantryman's viewpoint that, regardless of the new weapons, any war, even though started by air or sea power, must be finished by the foot soldier. Mr. Eisenhower, an old infantryman himself, agrees.

The situation, many observers think, serves to explain some things that may have been puzzling the American public—why the U.S. does not take a more aggressive line toward Red China, why Northern Indo-China was yielded to the Reds, why, perhaps, there is no blockade of the Chinese coast, why Chiang Kai-shek is restrained from attacking the mainland.

Lesson in Korea. General Ridgway, 59, a studious and thoughtful veteran, knows what it means to fight in Asia. At Christmastime, 1950, he took command of the Eighth Army in Korea. U.S. forces with his men. Once, he knelt in the mud to tie the shoelace of a heavily burdened private.

The General also hovered over the battles in a helicopter, studying the terrain

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and the fighting. Troops were regrouped, redeployed. Massive Chinese onslaughts were met and turned back. Within three months after General Ridgway's arrival, the Eighth Army was advancing again.

The General went on to become Supreme Commander, Allied Powers. His headquarters were in Tokyo, but there were frequent visits to Korea. With the war going well and, many thought, victory in sight, General Ridgway, with other military leaders began to feel the frustration of orders from Washington limiting his objectives, circumscribing his actions. What might have been a victory became a holding operation, a stalemate.

Decision on Asia. Now, General Ridgway wants no repetition of that Korean experience. If the U. S. is to fight in Asia again, he wants an army equal to the task and free to win. And, until his Army is capable of undertaking the job, he opposes even limited action by air or sea forces. The General disagrees with those who hold that a war can be won by air or sea power alone.

As friends further outline his position: With the possible exception of the Japanese home islands in World War II, history shows no instance of a war's being won without the eventual use of ground forces. Any commitment of air power in Asia, he believes, must soon involve ground defenses over and above those that can be supplied by native troops. Air facilities on the ground must be defended.

Beyond that, General Ridgway's view is that, in the light of the Korean experience, it would be futile to send in driblets of infantrymen. There must be a force of sufficient numbers to make an impressive showing, to back up and train native troops, show them how to fight by example. There must be no fiasco resulting from insufficient preparation and forethought.

"Wars are fought not for control of the seas or control of the air," the General himself says. "Those are but intermediate steps toward the attainment of the final objective. That final objective is control of land and of the people living on it."

Other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff disagree. That disagreement recently came to a test in a top-level decision. There was a proposal that American air power be committed against the Chinese mainland if necessary to keep Red China from seizing the Quemoy and Tachen islands, stepping-stones to an attack on Formosa. The proposal was backed by Adm. Arthur W. Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Adm. Robert B. Carney, Chief of

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Staff of the Navy; and Gen. Nathan F. Twining, Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

Alone among the Joint Chiefs, General Ridgway demurred. The issue was threshed out by the National Security Council. President Eisenhower sided with General Ridgway and that was that. Earlier there was a discussion as to whether U. S. air should intervene in Indo-China. General Ridgway opposed such action. The other Joint Chiefs thought it feasible. No high-level decision was made.

General's progress. Even before the Korean assignment, General Ridgway was a veteran fighting man. Virginia born, he was graduated from West Point in 1917, fretted out World War I in Texas. Between wars, he held a variety of routine posts, attended the service schools, and finally drew assignments calling for special talents. In World War II, General Ridgway commanded airborne troops in Italy and Western Europe.

From his Far Eastern command, General Ridgway was shifted to Paris to become Mr. Eisenhower's successor as Supreme Commander of Allied forces in Europe. Then, in mid-1953, Mr. Eisenhower, as President, chose General Ridgway as Chief of Staff of the Army, its ranking officer.

At that time, General Ridgway took over an Army which, due to the Korean fighting, was nearly at the summit of its postwar strength. It numbered 1,532,-133 officers and men. In the preceding year, 16.3 billion dollars had been spent on its supply, equipment, training and upkeep. But the still-new Republican Administration was looking for economies.

A review of military policies and budgets, the now-famous "new look," was ordered. It came up with a decision that future wars would be dominated by air power, that the foot soldier would be less important. Hence the decision was to strengthen the Air Force and the air wing of the Navy and cut back the Army.

Inside the Pentagon, General Ridgway earnestly protested. He argued vigorously with the other Chiefs of Staff, with civilian budget-making powers. But when the decision was made, he became, of course, the obedient soldier, set upon making the best of the situation ordered by his superiors. He had had his say in the proper places. Congressional committees tried to pry out of him his opposition to the decisions that had been made. They did not get very far, but in an occasional speech General Ridgway took the opportunity to speak emphatically of the continuing importance of the ground soldier.

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General Ridgway

Another cut for Army? Meanwhile, with the Air Force and the naval air arm growing, the General had to reduce his command. From 1,532,133 officers and men in mid-1953, it fell to 1,407,200 at mid-1954. Further projected cuts estimatedly will leave the Army with 1,170,000 next July 1, unless, as may happen, General Ridgway can keep the level from dropping quite that far.

The Army's share of the defense dollar, which had been greater than that of the Air Force, dwindled, too, from 16.3 billion dollars in 1953 to 13 billion in 1954, and for the current fiscal year the total is expected to drop to 9.2 billion dollars. For this year, Air Force expenditures are expected to total 15.5 billion dollars.

With the Army cuts have come other problems. Army morale is thought to have suffered. To both officers and men it is a cheerless prospect to consider that the Army had been relegated to a position as the least necessary of the services. But they do not blame General Ridgway. They have a deep admiration for their Chief of Staff.

Much of the Army's vexation at its low estate is aimed instead at President Eisenhower. Army men point out that the decision to cut back the ground forces was approved by that old infantryman, the President; that he could, if he should choose to do so, begin rebuilding the Army. But, as things stand, Army expenditures in the next fiscal year are expected to approximate this year's outlays.

Thus, Mr. Eisenhower agrees with General Ridgway that the Army is too weak to undertake an action in Asia. And yet, the President shows no disposition to strengthen U. S. ground forces materially. In this situation, observers see indications that Asian-mainland intervention is to be avoided for some time to come.

Prospects, these observers say, are that General Ridgway will continue to hold and exercise his veto over war proposals in the Far East. With President Eisenhower backing him, the General becomes a one-man majority at meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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