

[A “ scan read” of...]¹

**CRESTING THE DIVIDE**  
**History of the Chinese Attack on Alaska:**  
**A Small War Experiment in Watershed Warfare**

**By**

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¹ Includes the *Preface*, the *Conclusion* and a smattering of the text that is of particular relevance to the reader who is not a military historian.

Dedicated to

Barrant C. (BC) Rall

Without whom this book would not have been possible

He still lives herein and resides as such in our fondest memories

Taiwan could become the occasion for a very nasty confrontation indeed. [2005]

Ted Galen Carpenter  
*America's Coming War With China*

Again and again, we find military memory, under pressures of war,  
failing to adapt readily to the unanticipated or unprecedented  
results of action, and, instead, trying to hammer  
facts into the mold of preconceptions...

John Shy  
*A People Numerous and Armed*

## **PREFACE**

Sun Tzu tells his Chinese readers that the best way to win wars is without fighting. The preliminary research examined herein indicates this probably was the case *after* all US services converged on Alaska to counter-attack the People's Liberation Army (PLA) there. Findings from this inquiry also point to the likelihood that China's true intent was the annexation of Taiwan and that Taipei's surrender without a fight was all but assured, as soon as the Pentagon focused all US armed services on the Alaskan theater.

Instead of revisiting the numerous excellent accounts of how the US military won such a decisive victory at Fairbanks, this monograph looks hard at the possibility that the People's Republic of China (PRC) suffered *only* a defeat of its secondary attack in a much larger scale operation. An impressive body of evidence reveals that the PLA conducted a wide turning movement, which achieved a stunning strategic surprise by attaining its main objective on Taiwan. It may have crossed an historic divide to a new watershed in which the very nature of warfare was changed.

For a very long time no one in the West and very few in China took the possibility of any invasion of Alaska seriously. The Seward Peninsula may have been only 50 sea miles from Russia, but "Why would anyone do so?" Thought most Americans. And, "how could it possibly succeed?" Thought others. The Pentagon saw the prospect of 100,000 troops walking 3,000 miles undetected for six months across non-belligerent territory as the stuff of fantasy – a "wild card" in its lexicon and easily dismissed as such. In fact, new information detailed in this study suggests that such a trek did occur. The earlier host of seemingly reasonable doubters had not reckoned with

several subtle but radical changes that had occurred across the political and military landscape of Northeast Asia and the Russian Far East since World War II.

There are circumstances in war when 100,000 soldiers show up, on foot, unannounced, which can make advanced weaponry, superior technology, and the best strategic mobility assets irrelevant. Surprise is such a circumstance. It enables a variety of “force multipliers” to make formerly infeasible combat missions possible for second rank powers. Our work establishes that this advantage specifically gave the PLA the capability to infiltrate a force aimed only at Fairbanks. Its only mission was to divert the US Navy from the Straits of Taiwan in indirect support of a main attack against the beaches of the main island. That amphibious assault effort fulfilled Sun Tzu’s maxim when the Republic of China (ROC) surrendered without a shot. That precipitous capitulation has muddied retrospection and given free reign to no little military obfuscation – some perhaps unintentional, some perhaps not so.

Historically it looks as if the PLA invasion of Alaska “rhymes” with its prior attack on United Nation’s forces across the Yalu River in 1950. Those 300,000 Chinese “volunteers” were a diversionary effort to distract the US (and the world) from the seizure of Tibet by the People’s Republic. It was a successful ruse indeed. The US military was so traumatized by what it believed to be a “rescue” of North Korea that it held off an invasion of Hanoi 15 years later (doing so for 10 long, bloody years) for fear that the PRC might also “rescue” the North Vietnamese.

Suffering a single surprise by an innovative great power should not be a serious setback – in and of itself -- for a superpower, especially if it wins the encounter. There are significant advantages to being on top. A “sole remaining superpower” should be able to mobilize vast economic resources and exploit the finest military infrastructure to quickly incorporate the enemy’s

innovations into its military doctrine and lead the rest of the world over the divide into a new military watershed – reformed and threat ready.

The problem in our case is that the Pentagon has yet to absorb the lessons of the Alaskan Campaign and initiate reforms. The brass has dismissed the conflict as a one-off “wild card” unlikely to be repeated. They only acknowledge that they were surprised – this time. Moreover, they have ignored dangerous developments that sparked the clash and now Americans remain as vulnerable to strategic surprise as before. Too often in history, small wars are the precursors to subsequent, greater conflagrations. Generals of the Great War on their deathbeds must have lamented the day they ignored the military lessons of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Roman Tribunes hung their heads in perpetual shame for dismissing the importance of Hannibal’s small wars on the Iberian Peninsula prior to his approach over the Alps.

In sum, this book is about that one embarrassing “wild card,” which turned up in a big hand for a small but prestigious pot. It had been the “outlier” considered unworthy of a defensive contingency plan. The PLA’s wide turning movement was the “impossible” concept of operations designed to seize an improbable objective, which squeezed effective capabilities out of prosaic equipment -- some relegated to the service support sector. This is a history, which attempts a fuller explanation of how that happened and why it should not have been so.

## **Key Historical Examples**

### ***The Roman Republic -- Sole Remaining Superpower of 218 B.C.***

#### ***Meets the Carthaginian "Wild Card"***

In the middle of the 3rd century B.C. -- the early days before the Roman Empire became the undisputed ruler of the known world -- the Republic had just reached the level of military superiority in its civilization that Great Britain reached in the 18th century and the US has attained recently. By 241 B.C. Rome had decisively defeated its arch rival, Carthage, in the First Punic War and benefited significantly from the tribute and added territory. It believed it could ignore Carthaginian general Hannibal's ongoing small wars in Spain -- chalking them up to taming of the natives in their own sphere of influence.

Only one generation after its great victory Rome came very close to losing it all. In 218 B.C. Hannibal shocked the over confident Romans into a state of incessant desperation that lasted most of another generation. After making a completely unanticipated land approach across the Alps, Hannibal's strategic surprise crushed Rome's legions in three major battles in three years. These were not fights that the legions fought and retreated to fight another day. Outnumbered Carthaginians largely annihilated the Roman armies right on the battlefield.

As the sun set over the carnage at the Battle of Cannae in 216 B.C. Rome had suffered cumulative losses of nearly 100,000 men in an era when whole armies seldom exceeded 50,000. The bewildering aspect of the invasion that really stunned the once overpowering Romans was that Hannibal managed to continue the campaign, undefeated, for fifteen years, cut off from Carthage, with only 40,000 troops. Imagine the depth of the despair caused by an aggressive and invincible army stalking back and forth across one's homeland for well over a decade.

Despite the apparent hopelessness of their plight, it was the Romans who eventually prevailed. The fledgling Republic kept on coming back. Roman alliances with other states on the Italian peninsula held fast and the walls of city of Rome remained sufficiently imposing to deter Hannibal from besieging the home base. However the Romans could have avoided the costly setbacks and the dozen years of cringing before Carthage, if they had learned the lessons of Hannibal's earlier warfare in Spain.

[Sources: "Great Captains Before Napoleon," Dept. of MA&E, USMA and Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*.]

## GREAT BRITAIN AND THE FRENCH "WILD CARD"

At the end of the 18th Century Great Britain suffered one of the greatest strategic surprises in the annals of military history. The military setback not only cost the British their dominant position in Europe but also opened the way to Napoleon's conquest of most of the continent. Britain had quite a distance to fall. The British Navy ruled the seas and her archenemy, France, was in the throes of the most debilitating revolution the world had yet seen. Great Britain's promising international circumstances were remarkably similar America's in the twenty aughts.

So, it was with very few misgivings that the British organized a coalition of major and minor military powers to invade France and restore "stability" -- not unlike the several American post Cold War interventions of recent years. To everyone's amazement the beleaguered French revolutionaries not only stopped the invasion in 1792 but also defeated that coalition decisively enough in 1793 to seize territories on the Rhine River and in the Netherlands.

The French had surprised everyone by raising an army of unprecedented size. The effort, called the *levee en masse*, used mass conscription and mobilized the French economy to the extent that it could well be considered the first planned war economy in European history.

By 1797 -- a mere five years after the first battle -- Great Britain was in retreat on all fronts and had been overthrown as the militarily ascendant power in Europe. These

early French victories then provided the resources and psychological impetus that Napoleon Bonaparte exploited to take his nation all the way to undisputed military supremacy in Europe.

The importance of this historical analogy to present day Americans lies in the truly unforeseen nature of the surprise. It came from the social power of revolutionary zeal that was completely alien to the 18th Century European's experience. The magnitude of the sheer astonishment about something with such great military significance as the *levée en masse* emerging from something so unrelated to warfare as the sociology of mass, social revolution was beyond prediction before 1790. That could well be where we are today -- not necessarily facing a revolution, but perhaps facing something as totally remote from our own experience as social revolution was in the 18th Century.

Europe, led by the British, did bounce back, of course, crushing France by defeating Napoleon at Waterloo. However, they could have escaped or mitigated the drawn out consequences of a generation of world wide warfare by heeding the lessons so graphically portrayed earlier on the battlefields of 1792 - 1793.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

On the stage of world political history it was but another blip much like the Crimean War, but in the arena of military history, it may have moved the earth underfoot like another battle of Saratoga. While the river of world affairs rolls on as before, the world's leading militaries might be in a new watershed where all is changed. Fundamental doctrines that have endured for generations may have vanished and we can only hope that new contingency plans are undergoing multiple drafts in the hands of numerous Pentagon authors.

It could have been another of those "small" wars between great powers that presage major global conflicts -- another of those occasions in history when the second best powers have been forced to innovate and find a way around the sole superpower's advantages. This could have been a small taste of the new possibilities that have unfolded. Someday soon, we could end up in the same boat as the Romans facing Hannibal or the British at the mercy of Bonaparte. To avoid such fate we must play catch-up. The things we have to do are simple. Yet, as Clausewitz warned, in war simple things can be excruciatingly difficult. To win next time the United States Army will have to break the ranks. Small units will have to be turned loose at the garrison and be able to meet, two million strong, on a distant battlefield. It is easy enough to state such a mission, but it will demand a new officer corps and sergeants the caliber of present officers. Our new army would elevate GPS instruments to equality with their rifles and learn to walk in step with Stonewall Jackson's foot cavalry.

The recent Sino-American War has been too easy to dismiss. No great power territories changed hands. Forms of government remained intact and combatant regimes in power at the

outset were still there at the end. In an unusual historical turn of events, both sides could claim success, although neither felt real satisfaction. Things were soured for the People's Republic by the costliness of the war; the tenuousness of its new Eastern shore on Taiwan; and the unexpected persistence of United States' military dominance. Americans, for their part, are troubled by the unspoken reality that they had been taken unawares and it could have been worse.

We do have reason to worry. The factually rigorous military analysis in these pages justifies that intuitive unease. Despite the prevailing American public opinion that the war was an unqualified success, we can no longer ignore the fact that the Chinese forces actually accomplished their military missions. The United States vulnerabilities, exposed so dramatically in the early stages of the war, cast a shadow on the unquestionable competence of the counter-attack. Suffering such a devastating surprise in spite of the Trillions of dollars spent over the years on intelligence and defense is an accounting that is still simmering. Moreover, like an goat on the dining table, it is hard to ignore the reality that Taiwan is now a province of the People's Republic of China. Even American policy makers who were re-elected still taste the bitterness of losing such a well-placed ally. Their multitudinous explanations ring true enough but echo hollow.

The US battlefield successes did confirm our nation's stature as the world's leading military power, but we cannot avoid being haunted by the those decades of unqualified support for the independence of Taiwan, which ended so abruptly after the news of the retreats from Fairbanks and Lodge Creek. Although it is difficult to remember when you heard it, if ever, on America's very circumspect news outlets, it has never been denied. On rare occasions, when asked, United States policy makers seldom fail to point out that Taipei *did surrender* before US forces could intervene. That fact may brighten the picture but it does not obscure the fact that a long-standing pillar of US foreign policy had been toppled by a methodically planned strategic diversion, which

we must concede, worked out even though the People's Liberation Army lost every battle after the brief fall of Fairbanks.

Despite repeated assertions, a third party did not somehow secretly transport Chinese ground forces as far as the Bering Sea. Evidence herein makes it clear that they walked. One hundred thousand specially trained troops of the People's Liberation Army trekked 3,000 miles decentralized into five-man crews and re-assembled 6 months later as a combined arms fighting force. How they did it should concern US military professionals for decades. The Pentagon will have to repair the numerous shortcomings of the US military establishment and its supporting intellectual infrastructure. It will not suffice to fix the specific problems that led to the invasion. It will also be necessary to change the military culture that stymied innovative thinking.

Of course, the counter-surprise was our unexpected ability to fight back in Alaska after being so stunned and so savagely injured in the initial attacks. The unstated secondary objective of the Taiwan seizure had always been to reduce the global power of the United States. Finding Americans still on top after all the expenditure of Chinese blood, treasure and energy; has taken luster from what could have been a celebrated victory. As lusterless as it may have been for the Chinese forces, what the American public has really failed to realize in the intervening years is that this war *does* remain a PLA operational success of considerable military importance.

The evidence presented here has not sought to overturn the standard interpretation of the battle for Alaska. The chronicles of heroism and accounts of the remarkable agility of US total force response deserves to remain in the annals of great victories. Except for the repeated claims that Russian help was essential to the Chinese invaders and the deafening silence about the annexation of Taiwan, the accepted version of the Alaskan Campaign as a decisive defeat for the Chinese forces in that theatre remains largely intact. This account differed only in viewpoint and

the addition of new facts – principally about the Chinese methods and objectives. While books preceding this investigation have emphasized chronological narration, combat history, and public information, this interpretation focused exclusively on strategic factors and mostly from the Chinese perspective. It is easy to accept both versions. We can congratulate the courage of the troops and commanders *in the field* and reward those in government who supported the operations. However, victorious Americans should not forget the deeply imbedded military deficiencies. One can celebrate the victory and still recognize the need for reform.

What we have sought herein is a reliable measuring stick to assess future threats. Only an unsparing investigation of every past military shortcoming will suffice as the indispensable first step in gauging our potential adversaries.

After all, there is clearly abundant new evidence to indicate that the Chinese military conducted a ruthlessly efficient campaign against Alaska -- right up to the point, that is, when they were so decisively trounced on the field of battle. In the approach phase, it seems they took unprecedented risks with new, untried methods. It is entirely possible that the generals of the People's Republic have actually crossed an historical watershed and US leaders missed it. The US may have won decisively that infamous fall, but what about that next encounter? Is it conceivable that the US and its NATO allies have become just a bit dated? The Chinese or those who adopt their innovations may well have small but cruelly significant advantages in some future fight. If indeed the rivers of military history are flowing in different directions in this new watershed, the Western powers could be the ones struggling upstream against enemies who could win every time from now on – until we catch-up.

This Chinese operation may well have been the key stroke in another of those “small wars” involving great powers that presage great global conflicts. If so, that makes a full accounting of any

military aspects of such a success very important indeed. Van Creveld may have been more mistaken than even his critics suppose. Not only could “big war” *still* be a threat, but also a “big one” could be *imminent*. It is just probable that the nasty surprise in Alaska was another of those occasions in history when the sole superpower’s vast advantages have forced second best powers to innovate. All of those seductive reassurances of “full spectrum dominance” made at the beginning of this century could be backfiring. They set us up to see the Alaskan Campaign as confirmation of superiority when it was more likely an opening salvo in some truly major conflagration yet to come.

Moreover, we may not have unlimited time before a great power war could be upon us. After all, it was a mere nine years after the Russo-Japanese War that World War I erupted; merely eleven years after the American Revolution presaged the humiliation of the British superpower with the *levée en masse* and only four years after the United States’ Civil War’s lessons that the fledgling German nation state started pushing itself onto the world stage. It has already been several years -- not months -- since the end of the Sino-American War and no significant institutional changes are underway. What is more worrisome, there seems to be scant concern about just how well the Chinese may have fared at America’s expense and, hence, how urgent is the need for remedial action.

The first step is a straightforward re-evaluation of what actually transpired right under the US military’s noses. It is clearly time that some military policy makers admit we could be currently overmatched in some aspects of the military art, because in a purely military sense, in the areas of strategic mobility, organization and small unit tactics we probably are. The Pentagon can begin rectifying the deficiencies by exposing – if only internally – the termites in the woodwork of victory.

There are a good number of conjectures and debatable conclusions in the collection of new evidence herein, but it is completely uncontroversial that the appearance of so many Chinese so near Fairbanks stunned the leaders of the United States armed forces. This is not promising at all. Continuing to claim that, "It is Russia's fault," is to remain in denial. How long can the Pentagon realistically maintain that destruction of our anti-ballistic missiles in Greely was more important to China than the annexation of Taiwan? The virtually insuperable tactical obstacles to any attack on Greely ought to be sufficient to discredit the story. Furthermore, the absence of Moscow's logistical capability in the Russian Far East and the illogic of the supposed "new nuclear triangle" are both factors, which serve to further discredit the contention that China's primary objective was US ballistic missile defense.

Unfortunately, it is still an incontrovertible fact that when 100,000 or so troops could pop up virtually anywhere -- unannounced -- the existing conventional forces have a formidable problem on their hands. Eons ago military scholars learned that armies simply cannot defend everywhere -- all the time.

It is one thing to be caught totally unaware by an enemy strategic attack using only conventional weapons and low technology mobility, but quite another and a more serious matter to fail to adapt. By attributing the People's Liberation Army's movements to secret Russian assistance and surveillance gaps in the Bering Strait, the Pentagon risks conceding a new combat advantage to others. That mistaken assessment of what occurred in Alaska could jeopardize America's national defense well into the foreseeable future. Denial will make us blind to the full potential of GPS navigation and IT management of dispersed strategic mobility assets. It will prevent American logisticians from taking advantage of the capabilities of low cost pre-positioning and cruise missile technology to re-supply decentralized forces. In turn, these shortfalls will

prevent the United States from defensively reorganizing our ground forces, looking for other ways to fully integrate existing technologies like GPS and, in general, upgrading our ability to detect enemy innovations before they are upon us.

In addition, denial will keep us from reforming the flawed institution that fostered the intellectual complacency that made the strategic surprise so effective in the first place. American military thinkers might have missed the coming onslaught, in part, because they had already accepted so many conventional interpretations of some truly conspicuous historical precedents in the revisionist literature that would have made enemy innovations more noticeable. Such unfortunate conformism among so many military intellectuals hid the relevance of both the seizure of Tibet in November 1950 and the actual extent of the de-centralization of the twenty-first century Russian state. The graver danger is that those military intellectuals of the next generation might fail to understand how mistaken their predecessors were.

Could it be because of the difficulty of imagining that another nation, so far behind, had the capability to leap ahead so quickly? Was that why the US so easily perceived the Alaskan Campaign to be a one-of-a-kind bolt from the blue never to be repeated?

It is still puzzling to see how easily the Pentagon seems to have forgotten infamous case of mistranslated Chinese intelligence, or still worse, failed to recall the equally notorious Iraqi deception operation of 2003, which feigned non-existent WMD in Iraq. Decades of presumption that only American forces wielded “shock and awe” seemingly created an irresistible temptation to write off lesser powers as “wild cards.”

Could it be that the US military thinkers had been underestimating the People’s Liberation Army only because they did not have enough sophisticated aircraft, nuclear submarines, or precision guided munitions? This, despite the United Nation’s disappointing experience in Korea

against the same People's Army, and despite so many historical examples where technological advantage alone did not change the outcome in major wars.

The brazen self-assurance that comes so naturally with superpower status could easily disguise the potential genius of those who appear unable to do those things, which equate to combat effectiveness in the minds of the superpower's leaders. For half a century US combat effectiveness was equated only with technological proficiency. At the very turn of the new century *The Army XXI* claimed "total dominance... across the whole spectrum of warfare" but pointed in each case only toward technical or materiel weapons superiority over allies and potential adversaries. As we pointed out, this is particularly perplexing because as late as WWII most experts considered the Germans to be the undisputed masters of weapons technology. They, not the Americans or British, were the High-tech giants of their day. Their tanks were much better. They developed jet planes and rockets while Russians and Americans could only hope to out-produce them with lesser quality armaments. However, those lesser lights managed somehow to prevail. They did so by dabbling with such ancillary "service support" items as radar, code breaking and U238. Not only did those "hardware lesser powers" win the war, but did so unconditionally, a margin unprecedented in modern military history.

Clearly, the US had every reason to expect that some major challenge would come from a source not counting on superior technological proficiency. Perhaps seeing the Chinese Alaskan operation as a continuation of long standing historical military trends might have reduced the shock of discovering Chinese infantrymen astride the Yukon. The annals of well-known military ventures from Alexander to Schwarzkof might just have revealed that China's seeming bolt from the blue was really just another rung in a very tall ladder.

Therefore, it should not have been quite so unexpected that some great power would radically revolutionize their military in spite of the United States' seeming invincibility. Under the heel of a sole superpower's over confidence, some military power from the international peer group -- sometimes from the second rank — has often triumphed. Half a dozen times in military history, such upstarts have developed entirely new military organizations, revolutionary doctrines or new operational syntheses, which have broken the superpower's monopoly on military coercion. If the Persian giant of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. could incite a humble Macedonian city state to perfect the phalanx; if Roman arrogance could motivate Hannibal to such heights of martial prowess; if the overbearing Spanish superpower could give birth to centuries of British naval supremacy; if the prostration of French arms at the feet of the British superpower could inspire such a breathtaking innovation as the *Levee' en masse*; if the divided German people's unpleasant centuries at the mercy of Europe's great powers could precipitate a strategic overturn of the magnitude of the 1866-1870 unification wars; then why not China in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? It has clearly grown as a peer in other respects since the 1990's.

It also should not have surprised military historians that not-so-new technologies have created important military advantages on a number of key occasions. The English long bow and the Viking long boat serve to illustrate just how far back we can see this variety of advantage emerging. More recent examples -- such as the full integration of railroads into a decisive instrument of war -- might have forewarned military scholars about the potential strategic importance of something as mundane as the GPS system.

For instance, the US dumbfounded the other practitioners of the military art by putting together unremarkable landing craft, second rate attack aircraft, old warships and rusty transports

to create an offensive amphibious war machine that none of the Axis powers could withstand. That patchwork of everyday, mid-Century military hardware remained unmatched through the 1991 Gulf War and is still so to this late date. As unoriginal as it may have seemed, that formidable capability was itself merely an update of what the Vikings had done so well in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century – principally in Normandy of all places. Those Americans, former masters of such low-tech full-use doctrine, set a standard that their own grandchildren curiously seem to have had some trouble remembering. Making war without the latest cutting-edge gizmos appears to have become an unexpectedly alien concept in our time.

The Germans in 1940 also put together new uses for not-so-new equipment. They called it *Blitzkrieg*. State of the art tanks were made to seem irresistible by slow flying *Stukas* in close air support and motorized infantry only a short step up from horse drawn wagons. In the nineteenth Century, due mainly to widespread discounting of the railroad's wartime usefulness -- discovered during the American Civil War -- Europeans were not ready for the speed of Germany's mobilizations in 1866 and again in 1870. The pedestrian combination of intricate timetables, telegraph and rolling stock supported an innovation that put the transition from peacetime to war on a hair trigger, where it has remained ever since. In 1941, several corps of Japanese flowed steadily *on foot* through allegedly impenetrable jungle to outflank Singapore. The Chinese People's Liberation Army appeared 300,000 strong, as if by magic, South of the Yalu in Korea during the winter of 1950. The French are still wondering how so many Viet Minh, so heavily armed got into the hills around *Dien Bien Phu*. Just as we Americans were so bewildered by the Viet Cong's startling display of unforeseen mobility down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and their out-of-the-woodwork appearance *en masse* during *Tet* 1968.

Sudden leaps of mobility by prosaic means are clearly nothing new, and neither is greater dispersion. The People's Liberation Army's novel organization of highly dispersed small groups would simply be an unsurprising next rung on the historical ladder. In fact, it is probably the longest, most predictable trend in military history. Progressively wider spreading of units in combat formations began in the shadowy era after 300 B.C. when the first overall troop commander removed himself from the actual fighting to oversee the battle.

Ever since the spectacularly successful phalanx bunched fighters shoulder to shoulder and back to front as close as was humanly practicable, foot soldiers have deployed progressively further apart. Over the centuries, the bird's eye view of battlefield formations evolved from sets of tightly packed boxes at close intervals into lines. The line segments then spread further apart. Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Napoleon retained the line segments, but turned them end-on to fight as columns, and began to deliberately operate larger groupings of mutually supporting columns at 6 to 12 hours march apart. By the time the WWII style conventional infantry forces fought the North Vietnamese Army, units had become only small separated groupings of muzzle flashes and disembodied voices on FM radios.

The hypothesis that the People's Liberation Army spread 100,000 troops across a 150 mile wide swath over a 3,000 mile march could be simply the most recent culmination of this tendency toward greater dispersion that started when the more loosely joined Roman forces began to consistently defeat the tightly bunched phalanx on the battlefield. If three Chinese corps starting at 20,000 five-man boat groups can be correctly seen as just another point on a wide spectrum of warfare and not as some underhanded *deus ex machine*, the possibility that a People's Army long trek took place without Russian help gains plausibility. Very often in the past, those who take the next great step forward are perceived as somehow "cheating" by those who may have been left

behind. Victory for innovators has often seemed to come all too easily. “That can’t be done!” Is a refrain that was probably heard frequently amongst the Roman legions assembled to meet Hannibal at the foot of the Alps or by the battered and scattered Spanish galleons scurrying out of the English Channel in 1588. Moreover, let’s not forget those British liaison officers circulating amongst their perplexed allies at Valmy, 1792.

Like unforeseen mobility and expansive dispersion, the strategy of using supporting forces at a great distance from their primary objective also has ample precedent. Asians have used it several times in living memory. The most fundamental precept of China’s most likely grand strategy – to take Taiwan by diverting US military might to Alaska – would be just another example in a discernible trend in the evolution of Asian warfare. Great turning movements or diversions designed to strike targets well outside the principal theatre of war was probably first prescribed by *Sun Tzu*. The officer corps of the People’s Army probably understood quite well what he described as the pinnacle of military achievement: “To conquer your foe without fighting,” and its two closely related key tenets, “Be strong where your enemy is weak” and “strike far from where your enemy expects you to be.” Far indeed. The Japanese diversionary strike on Pearl Harbor was 5,000 miles from the nearest strategic objective in the Philippines. The Chinese main objective of Tibet in 1950 was 2,000 miles from the People’s Army strategic diversion operation across the Yalu into North Korea. And, if the North Vietnamese did use the Tet Offensive – knowingly — to land a blow on the US home-front (characterized by some as the US “center of gravity”), then we can add yet another Asian diversionary operation to our list. In this case, the objective was 9,000 miles from the fighting. Seeing his modern countrymen aimed at Taiwan, but maneuvering in Alaska would probably have put a gleam in Sun Tzu’s inscrutable eye.

The historical examples of strategic diversion fit well with decentralized dispersion and comprehensive adaptation of existing technologies in a pattern of increasing plausibility. Historically it is an unsurprising replay of past military innovation. Not only do we find that the Chinese were apparently *not* in a treacherous nuclear conspiracy with Moscow nor were they likely to have overleaped more advanced military powers out-of-the-blue beyond all reasonable expectations. They were downright unoriginal, following one obvious historical precedent after another as if it were a script.

It is almost heartbreaking to think how clearly the US military contingency planners might have seen it all coming. Since that first fateful Quadrennial Defense Review, they cavalierly dismissed so-called “wild cards” as “analytical outliers” that, “cannot be fully anticipated.” However, in warfare such “outliers” can bring very high pay-offs. Surprise looms so very large in any military reckoning. Ignoring those low percentage “wild card” possibilities for so long might have paved the way for the Liberation Army’s high return in Alaska. We can only hope that the US might restore the validity of “wild card” analysis – even this long in the after its demise.

Postwar analysis and reportage was no help. The absence of hindsight on such a topic is truly perplexing. Military analysts and the news media showed a strange lack of curiosity about any other means Chinese trespassers might have used other than transport provided by Moscow. Skepticism about the official version of Russian participation has been virtually zero. The silence from the fourth estate is particularly odd because this story ought to lend itself to investigative journalism. There is not only a plethora of living witnesses, but also unusually open access to the Russian Far East that is the result of the very same militant autonomy that most likely allowed the covert transit in the first place. After all, virtually every POW defector claimed to be a long distance trekker. Would it not have been a good story simply to tell their tale, if only to debunk it?

What about retrospective investigations by military historians and other specialists? They have had years to reconsider any hasty suppositions made by their less introspective colleagues in the news business. Historians routinely fill in the blanks for journalists who miss so much in their haste to get scoops and meet deadlines? A conscientious military analyst would not have had to look far. Almost all articles and monographs about the Russian Far East and “greater Siberia” have a section on “regionalism,” “separatism,” or “regional autonomy.” These passages invariably address the growing independence from the central bureaucracy and the strengthening of ties to the Chinese central government. There are even occasional references to considerations of provincial “secession,” -- possibilities, which are not so unlikely in the context of the other defections from the old Soviet empire since 1989. With hardly an exception the numerous accounts of life in the Russian Far East mention the unsurprising fact that Russian business interests have more contact with Chinese officialdom than with remote and ill-informed Russian central authorities. If this preliminary investigation were to have been followed up by more serious on-site study, the story that RFE provincial governments looked away from behind a screen of plausible deniability would have surfaced long before now. The present open insurgency in the southern three RFE provinces adds significant credence to this point of view. Why the oddly persistent incuriosity? Is it a dependence upon conventional wisdom or, worse, a dread of contravening the authorized interpretation of events?

Then there is the still more mystifying absence of any validation of the National Guard’s early contribution to the victory in Alaska. The difficulties with witnesses and corroboration simply evaporate with regard to these friendly forces. Can we ever forget that great dash north up the Alcan Highway? Surely there is enough credit to go around? Is the reserve component’s threat to

the active force's supremacy so great that even independent analysts outside the military must honor the silence? It is a good story and shame that we have come to this pass.

A shame indeed. Is it possible that some in the Pentagon were suffering the same debilitating effects of being a superpower that were visited on their predecessors? Perhaps enough of the leadership succumbed so that they reached a tipping point – that elusive situation that can turn an entire institution in another direction. The phenomenon is probably not confined to the Pentagon brass. They are perhaps only the most visible manifestation and hence the only target in view for this limited critique.

These debilitating effects on those who succumbed might well be titled the “vicious spiral of success...” Nothing seems quite as deceptively secure as super-power rank. Indeed, it is a shaky perch at the top of the combat power pyramid. The descent from that pinnacle spins downward in a loop from glory to complacency through duplicity and repression to eventual defeat on some inglorious battlefield at the hands of some presumed inferiors.

The super power sanctimony did not float on a sea of *worthwhile* expenditures. Untold hundreds of Billions of tax dollars were devoted almost exclusively to the type of technology based force structure that won WWII. In this Century's first decade the US spent over and above what had been necessary during the preceding period of Cold War when a fully visible enemy, 170 divisions strong, confronted the US on three fronts. Pentagon money poured remorselessly into attrition warfare, heavy firepower, armored ground forces, aircraft carrier battle groups, and nuclear weapons. All of which contributed little to the defeat of global terrorist or to the recurring small wars in the Balkans, Persian Gulf, South Asia and the Middle East.

Convinced that upgrading the existing methods of mass attrition equated to unending supremacy, the Pentagon essentially engaged in a global competition with itself. But, that simply

concealed a deep-seated *complacency*. What remained unseen was the failure to actually address the changing nature of warfare – particularly in Asia. Despite repeated tactical defeats by low-tech enemies in Korea, Viet Nam and South Asia, the money, the sweat and the intellect of thousands went into ever more advanced gizmos and gadgets. The history of the plight of past superpowers was largely ignored and the possibility that some second rank great power would innovate was dismissed without the blink of an eye. It is very likely that over 100,000 Chinese soldiers marched right by this steely stare of unwarranted overconfidence.

Too many Pentagon officers seemed to exist in a climate where all fundamental assumptions about strategy, tactics and the operational art remained unchallenged. Any change in the technological emphasis on mass wars of attrition would necessarily have upset the balance. Therefore, nothing made it onto the Pentagon agenda that might have been construed to require any budget reduction. No general who had staked his career on the next generation of combat vehicles could possibly have entertained the serious consideration of a mode of war in which armor was irrelevant. No strategist could survive to his next assignment, if he were to propose corps movements, which did not rely upon the very same kind of air and naval forces that had given the US a monopoly on global strategic mobility since 1944. No wonder that the rare Pentagon critics who managed to speak out in the late 1990's used terms like "perfumed princes" and "mirrored halls" to describe these occupants and their workplace.

However, the principal problem was the *squelching of dissent*. This more than anything else put the US armed forces on a dangerously steep slope. As a rule, the "perfumed princes" knew they were beyond the boundaries of acceptable military conduct and were most reluctant to have their wayward ways examined -- however obliquely. In doing so, they created the infamous "no defects" movement of the last forty years. Perfect generals had only flawless subordinates.

Maximum performance ratings became the norm and no one, allegedly, ever made mistakes. Thus as the inevitable errors cropped up, they would have been glossed over with clever euphemisms, covered up, or brazenly ignored.

This corruption of military culture could probably never be proven in some hypothetical “truth commission” nor would it be indictable, if it were. Although it could plausibly be inferred from a large body of well-known facts divulged in the political discourse of the first decades of this Century – if transplanted into the new context of this war -- we won’t *know* for certain *why* the US military suffered such complete strategic surprise. We must patiently await the judgment of historians with the benefit of longer hindsight and belatedly declassified evidence.

What we *do know* is that the Pentagon was completely surprised by the seemingly spontaneous appearance of 100,000 troops of the People’s Liberation Army. We also know the lamentable corollary that the US military was unprepared for any ground offensive in Alaska. In addition, we do know that the US main force counter attack took three weeks to get underway. No heavy ground forces above battalion level (except for the unheralded National Guard initiative from the Northwestern states) engaged the People’s Army before the legendary Battle of Shaw Creek.

We *do* know that Taiwan’s untimely capitulation barely preceded the US counter-attack. We also know that the unexpected seizure of the *Peng Hu* Islands had occurred even before the surprise assault on Fairbanks. The subsequent negotiated evacuation of that disputed conquest had not started in earnest before the first Liberation Army infantrymen were spotted along the Yukon. In addition, no one contests the fact that the US military’s preoccupation with the Alaskan Campaign increased Taiwan’s vulnerability. It is also undisputed that the People’s Liberation Army constructed at least 18 new airfields and upgraded eight harbors in the same region across the

Straits from Taiwan. Not one military expert has denied that these measures improved the Liberation Army's posture *vis á vis* a cross-straits amphibious assault on the Republic of China.

*We do know* there is *little* or no hard evidence of Moscow's intentional complicity in the movement of so many Chinese to the Bering Strait. We also know there are some substantial evidentiary hurdles to verifying that Russian central authorities even had the requisite transport capabilities. In addition, we also know there is good reason to vindicate the Russians, if it is possible this late in the game. There is little doubt that the angry diplomatic break with the Russian Republic has escalated the nuclear threat. Respected nuclear analysts have argued, without contradiction, that the US nuclear force is in a "launch on warning" posture reminiscent of the Cold War. The great danger of accidental nuclear war -- so close in the 1980's -- has only been aggravated by the presence of improved ballistic missile defenses. This is particularly true since ABM's are now unconstrained by the sort of treaties that delimited their use decades ago. On the other hand, if our new version of the Alaskan Campaign proves to be the more accurate, it could represent a reduction in the threat of tactical nuclear warfare. If nations can now make an entire Corps appear out of nowhere, it means that an entire body of *battlefield* nuclear doctrine has been end-run. At least some of these dreaded "ultimate" weapons might have simply become still more irrelevant to decisive ground combat.

Finally, *we do know* there is ample historical precedent for sudden change in the nature of warfare. No controversy surrounds the examples presented herein of innovations made by second rank military powers used against the reigning superpowers of their day. Similarly the relevant military trends involving the increasing de-centralization of ever more dispersed combat formations; the frequent adaptations of existing technologies to combat advantage; and the recurring use

strategic diversions by Asians at great distance from the primary military objective; are uncontroversial.

So, if the American public can overcome its doubts and take into account some reasonable -- albeit uncomfortable -- new conclusions about the Alaskan Campaign perhaps the country can move toward identifying the more genuine future threats. Innovative great powers -- who may only look militarily weak through our own technologically biased prism -- could be standing ready to do this nation great harm. If Americans can shake-off the millstone of super-power certitude to prepare for such a worst-case contingency, maybe we *can* break the depressing cycle of the rise and fall of world military leaders for the first time since the fall of Rome. Perhaps we could be the very first sole remaining superpower to truly endure. Our benefits to mankind outnumbering our negative influences -- as they do -- should make us well worth the investment. Tolerating some loony seeming research and granting credibility and status to some nay-saying dissenters in the Pentagon seems a small price indeed. It is something the American superpower can ill-afford to scrimp on -- again.

**END**

