

A Whole of Nation Approach During Large Scale Combat Operations:

The Department of Labor and the American Workforce

by *Patrick W. Naughton Jr.*

As the American military shifts its focus to prepare for possible large-scale combat operations (LSCO) against possible peer-competitors, much attention has been paid to the martial aspect of this effort. However, what many overlook is that LSCOs of the future, as they have in the past, will involve a whole of government and indeed a whole of nation approach if the United States and its allies are to emerge victorious. This will require the synchronization and support of numerous interagency entities, federal agencies, and multinational partners, as well as all the industrial might that the country possesses. This effort will require numerous agencies that national security professionals do not normally associate with warfighting. One example to explore this further can be accomplished by examining the often-overlooked Department of Labor (DOL).

As the federal agency who oversees the overall wellbeing of the nation's workforce, the DOL will have a large role in marshalling energies behind the conflict. After all, total war efforts will be sustained by the hardworking men and women who are employed in economic activity concerned with the processing of raw materials and the manufacturing of goods. An examination of the performance of the DOL during past LSCOs in the modern era—World War I (WWI), World War II (WWII), the Korean Conflict, and the Persian Gulf War—will help educate strategic leaders on how federal agencies can support a whole of nation approach in a future conflict against a peer-competitor.

The Department of Labor and World War I

The DOL was established on March 4, 1913 and tasked with the same purpose that it still executes today. In the Act that created the DOL, the Secretary of Labor was granted the power to “act as mediator and to appoint commissioners of conciliation in labor disputes whenever in his

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judgement the interests of industrial peace may require it to be done.”¹ It was this stipulation that put the DOL on a path to support the U.S. war effort in WWI four years later. In the DOL’s annual report of 1917, the Secretary of Labor William Wilson noted that “the number of labor disputes calling for Government mediation increased suddenly and enormously with the beginning of the war.”²

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It was due to numerous challenges, the sheer workload, and the desire to streamline efforts across its various departments that the DOL—upon a request by President Woodrow Wilson to ensure a stable supply of labor to war industries—created the War Labor Board.³ This entity operated within the boundaries of an established set of principles that set precedence for all future conflicts. These principles included: no strikes or walkouts during the war, though Unions were not abolished; the maintenance of already established working conditions; equal pay for women; support of the eight-hour work day; discouragement of war profiteering; the creation of a national list of specially skilled workers to leverage during times of war; no changes to standards and customs set at the local level; and finally, all workers had a right to a living wage to support their families in reasonable comfort.⁴ As Secretary Wilson noted, as this balanced U.S. national security needs and employer concerns while maintaining the hard-fought-for and guaranteed rights of American workers, these principles were unlike any seen in history.

Though not perfect or devoid of issues, it was primarily through the War Labor Board that the DOL supported the considerable industrial

needs of the nation during the First World War. President Woodrow Wilson, in his annual speech to Congress in 1918, credited the DOL with helping win the war. He also singled out the American worker for supplying the tools and materiel needed for victory and placed their service on par with those on the front lines. He lauded their patriotism, unselfishness, and devotion “that marked their toilsome labors, day after day, month after month” and how it “made them fit mates and comrades of the men in the trenches and on the sea.”⁵

The expenditure of effort and materiel required by the U.S. to support its allies and military overseas was colossal. This would not have been possible without the DOL’s effort in mediating disputes between American workers and employers. It resulted in limited stoppages due to labor differences for key sustainment commodities and in manufacturing. Had a draconian approach been taken by the U.S. government to force its population into the factories and fields, Bolshevik movements such as that which occurred in Russia would easily have gained a stronger foothold and changed the face of America. A fair and balanced approach by the U.S. government which considered the needs of the war effort, employers, and employees, enabled a steady and uninterrupted stream of war materiel, vital to success in the Great War.

The Department of Labor and World War II

The feeling of patriotism and cooperation quickly eroded with the end of WWI. As the DOL noted, “following the signing of the armistice and the beginning of demobilization the existing good relations between employers and wage earners were very much disturbed.”⁶ Much occurred in the interwar years regarding labor. Leading the Department through this time was the first ever woman to be appointed to a Cabinet position, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins.⁷ It was under her leadership that the

DOL would again find itself supporting a whole of nation approach during the prolonged LSCOs of WWII.

By 1941, the U.S. understood that hostilities were imminent. As such, it began to prepare its industrial might to support the war effort. In the DOL's annual report of 1941, issued one month before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Perkins understood that "national security depends not only on military defense, but upon the health, safety, and efficiency, and general intelligence and well-being of our people."⁸ She began to prepare the agency to support the upcoming conflict; "the workers of the United States will, at all times, discharge their full duty in the trying days that lie ahead," concluded the report with her conviction that "theirs is the job of bringing us more and more of the guns, the planes, the tanks, and the ships that are so vital to all that we as Americans hold dear."⁹

With the entry of the U.S. into the war, President Franklin Roosevelt, through the War Power Acts, ordered the resurrection of the War Labor Board as "national interest demands that there shall be no interruption of any work which contributes to the effective prosecution of the war."¹⁰ This time, the DOL was not the administrative lead for the Board; rather, they were a main contributor that supported its mission. Perkins, pointing to lessons learned and precedence set from the last war, focused the Department's efforts on achieving maximum productivity by resolving industrial disputes, enforcing workplace safety and adequate physical conditions to reduce accidents, and administering reasonable work-rest cycles. She stressed that the way to avoid wasted effort and increase and maintain efficiency within industry was not through longer hours and unsafe standards aimed at cutting costs; rather, it was to eliminate wasteful practices and to grow the "understanding of the desirability of maintaining a steady flow of production with reasonably short working hours."¹¹

Immediately after the war, the new Secretary of Labor Lewis Schwellenbach concluded, "During a global war in which final victory rested so largely upon the productive capacity of this Nation, it is not surprising to find... [that] the Labor Department contributed directly to the war effort."¹² He further wrote, "Like the free institutions which we fought to preserve, good labor standards helped to create a moral climate that inspired hard, sustained toil throughout the war years." Schwellenbach believed that the labor force—augmented by a flux of new employees hired due to the restrictions on massive overtime being forced on existing personnel—established and strengthened a common resolve across the nation to defend it and secure victory.¹³

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President Harry Truman, in his speech following Japan's surrender, declared that the war "is a victory of more than arms alone." He explained that from manufacturing efforts, "rolled the tanks and planes which blasted their way to the heart of our enemies; from our shipyards sprang the ships which bridged all the oceans of the world for our weapons and supplies." Truman similarly noted the contributions in the production of commodities, "from our farms came the food and fiber for our armies and navies and for our Allies in all the corners of the earth; from our mines and factories came the raw materials and the finished products which gave us the equipment to overcome our enemies." The President also included the workforce in his final message of victory: "Our thoughts go out to the millions of American workers and businessmen, to our farmers and miners—to all those who have built

up this country's fighting strength, and who have shipped to our Allies the means to resist and overcome the enemy."¹⁴

As Secretary Schwollenbach noted, similar to WWI (though for a much longer period), "the country's manpower resources, facilities

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for production, and economic life in general had been mobilized and subjected to public controls for purpose of winning the war."¹⁵ From the support for the War Labor Board in resolving labor disputes to ensure uninterrupted productivity, to the laws and regulations enforced for proper working conditions, the DOL efforts resulted in the full industrial might of the nation being harnessed while avoiding extreme war weariness, excess waste, and a depletion of manpower and resources that would be sorely needed for recovery. Had this not occurred, the U.S. would have emerged on the other side of war in the same manner as much of Europe: drained of the necessities needed to bolster a robust and healthy economy. Due to the regulation and supervision provided over America's materiel and labor resources, the nation was now poised to become the dominant superpower.

The Department of Labor and the Korean Conflict

By 1950, as the conflict in Korea escalated into LSCOs, the economy in the U.S. continued to grow, with its gross national product at its highest in the nation's history.¹⁶ The DOL again found itself preparing to support a whole of nation effort. Unlike the two previous World Wars, the agency was on the front lines of the communist ideological struggle that lay behind

the conflict. According to the Secretary of Labor Maurice Tobin, since communism targeted the working class, the Labor Department, with assistance from trade-union movements, had been battling this ideology for years.¹⁷ He believed that the conflict was a global, "contest for the minds as well as the bodies of men, and it will be won through our strength of will and purpose. Our military and economic strength are the tools and the symbols of our efforts to make men free and ensure them better lives."¹⁸ Tobin understood that improper treatment of the labor force during the conflict could be exploited in the information environment by the enemy and thus weaken the war effort.

According to Tobin, the workforce was the "most important resource in building national strength"; he believed that it must be developed and utilized "in such a manner as to assure that it will make the maximum contribution to the mobilization effort."¹⁹ These were statements that the U.S. government agreed with. Rather than reestablish the War Labor Board, Public Law 774, known as the Defense Production Act, was passed. Its purpose was to ensure that civilian industry was prepared "to promote the national defense, by meeting, promptly and effectively, the requirements of military programs in support of our national security and foreign policy objectives."²⁰ To manage and oversee the provisions set forth in the Act, Truman created the Office of Defense Mobilization. The Office required the DOL to oversee the manpower policies that it directed.

To manage the nation's human capital, the DOL created the Defense Manpower Administration, which generated a set of nine policies for it to enforce. Similar to the efforts undertaken during past periods of national mobilization, the DOL personnel policies were established to "ensure the best use and greatest productivity of the labor force" all the while continuing to plan "for the contingency of a greater defense effort."²¹ The Department also

embraced its role in the battle against the spread of communist ideology. After the conflict, it devoted much of its 1954 annual report to advocating for the benefits of living and working in a free and democratic society, claiming that labor forces across the globe were of strategic importance in halting communism. The report stated, “when the self-expression, the liberty and the prosperity of the working people are assured, it follows that the broader objective—the well-being, strength, and greatness of our country and of all its people—is also assured.”²²

As in WWI and II, the DOL contributed directly to a whole of nation approach by ensuring the nation’s industry and production areas were adequately staffed without depleting resources. The Department played a key role in again ensuring that the American workforce was not overburdened or unfairly exploited, which ensured constant and sustainable productivity during the war. Unlike the previous conflicts, events in Korea required the DOL to play a much larger role in the whole of nation approach by combatting the spread of ideology that could be leveraged by adversaries in the informational environment. Lastly, with the creation and continued existence of the Defense Production Act, precedence was established that still exists today and will guide actions during future possible LSCOs scenarios.

The Department of Labor and the Persian Gulf War

U.S. military efforts between Korea and the start of the Persian Gulf War were dominated by Vietnam. While both North and South Vietnam easily reached the scale of total war, it was classified as a Counterinsurgency Operation for American forces and did not require the total mobilization of national resources. It was not until the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War that America would again find itself fully mobilizing to face Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the fourth largest army in the world. Lessons on a whole

of nation approach are harder to recognize, since much of the cost was offset by financial contributions from allies and did not require the total prolonged mobilization of industry. The Gulf War does, however, offer one lesson that is applicable to today: the utilization of reserve forces.

During the earlier Yom Kippur War in 1973, the U.S. observed how Israel managed and integrated their reserve elements as a true force multiplier. As the U.S. built combat power in theater, it quickly realized that sustainment activities had become critically stressed and could only be alleviated by combat support and combat service support units from the reserves.²³ Taking lessons from Israel, the Gulf War marked the first major call-up of reserve forces since Korea and the first time that they were used as an operational force rather than a strategic one.²⁴ This massive call up had an unintended effect, as noted by U.S. Army Europe commander Crosbie Saint, “The early decision to call up the reserves, while probably motivated by necessity, turned out to be a major catalyst in consolidating American public opinion behind our strategy in the Gulf.”²⁵

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By the end of the war, a total of 35,158 Army Reservist and 37,692 National Guardsmen were deployed to the region, while numerous others served stateside as backfills for critical shortages.²⁶ Their seamless integration and importance to the total force was demonstrated by the 14th Quartermaster Detachment, an Army Reserve unit who suffered the greatest combat loss in the war: 13 dead and 43 wounded from an Iraqi missile attack.²⁷ During possible LSCOs the Joint force will, just as in the Gulf War, rely heavily on the reserves for all sustainment

activities. From a whole of nation perspective, this becomes a critical point to grasp, as those reservists leave behind civilian careers which can be affected by their service. As the DOL noted after the demobilization of over 225,000 reservists, “Since the end of the Persian Gulf Conflict there has been an increase in Veterans’ Reemployment Rights activity, mainly concerning complaints by veterans regarding reinstatement to their jobs.”²⁸

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As the Persian Gulf War demonstrated and as holds true today, the total Joint Force will be unable to sustain prolonged LSCOs without the nation’s reserves. The DOL plays a crucial role in this as the administrator of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), which manages issues from individuals and employers who are dealing with service connected problems.²⁹ If the nation cannot guarantee a reservist’s employment upon their return to civilian life, it will impact recruitment and retention, which in turn will affect the ability to sustain the force during LSCOs. Lastly, reserve forces, via their deep-rooted presence in communities across the country, will assist with gaining and maintaining support from the population for the war effort.

The Department of Labor’s role in Future Possible LSCOs

The Defense Production Act, first enacted during the Korean War, has been reauthorized over 50 times and was recently used to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. Since its inception as an Act to primarily ensure that domestic industry could support requirements in times of total war, it has been expanded to cover a wide

range of potential events. Currently, the Defense Production Act allows the federal government to look past military preparedness and extend its efforts to support a wide range of perceived national emergencies under the holistic term of national defense.

The President of the United States has delegated the authorities bestowed from the Act to several department and agency heads via Executive Order (EO) 13603, *National Defense Resources Preparedness*.³⁰ This EO delegates the Presidential authorities of the Act to the Secretaries of Agriculture, Energy, Health and Human Services, Transportation, Defense, and Commerce. Though the DOL is not one of the six core supporting agencies, the EO does include the Secretary of Labor as a Defense Production Act Committee member and devotes an entire section specifically to labor requirements.

As directed in the EO, as a committee member the DOL has five main tasks to support national defense efforts: conduct a continuous appraisal of the nation’s workforce; assist with the development of deferment policies during times of conscription; consult with the six core agencies on any proposed action and the effect it will have on labor; formulate plans, policies, and estimate training needs to meet labor requirements; and lastly, develop and implement effective labor-management relations policies as needed. Illustrative of the importance of the DOL, the EO directs that “All agencies shall cooperate with the Secretary of Labor.”³¹

Under the Defense Production Act, the U.S. government still recognizes the importance of balancing the needs of the nation against the wellbeing of a healthy workforce. From a holistic national perspective, DOLs policies continue to support the Act and identify issues in the workforce that are counterproductive to efficiency. In the event of possible future LSCOs, the DOL can again ensure that maximum productivity will be achieved while not exhausting one of the nation’s most valuable

commodities that is needed during times of conflict as well as for recovery efforts—the labor force.

Conclusion

America cannot conduct a prolonged LSCO without the full backing of its industrial might behind it. “Our problem is to achieve adequate military strength within the limits of endurable strain upon our economy,” noted President Dwight Eisenhower during the Korean War; “to amass military power without regard to our economic capacity would be to defend ourselves against one kind of disaster by inviting another.”³²

Many strategic leaders understand that industry must be harnessed to wage total war; however, they often overlook the workforce that makes this possible. All the steel and raw commodities in the world mean nothing if you have a war-weary, disgruntled, or depleted labor force. As one contemporary warned during the Great War regarding this balance, “It would be an evil day for America if we threw overboard liberty to make room for efficiency.”³³ Leaders must understand what a whole of nation approach to conflict consists of if the U.S. is to be able to engage in possible prolonged LSCOs against a peer-competitor.

A country’s civilian workforce is one of several not readily recognizable matters of national security. However, historical naval blockades to provoke starvation and unrestricted bombing campaigns on civilian population centers were aimed at that center of gravity. By examining LSCOs in the nation’s history, it becomes apparent how the labor force contributed to the colossal industrial efforts undertaken to support and recover from total war events. The DOL established a set of principles in WWI that created a foundation that served it well as it continued to support national defense policies.

From mediating labor disputes, improving working conditions, establishing the eight-hour workday, and managing critical civilian skill sets to battling ideology that could be leveraged in the information environment, the DOL led the way in ensuring that American labor was not wasted or misused, and was still capable enough to drive recovery efforts. Lastly, past conflicts demonstrate how critical the nation’s reserve forces have become, and how this may affect public opinion, the economy, and the labor force. The DOL did not singlehandedly ensure victory during past LSCOs; however, it did play a major part in the interagency efforts that occurred in supporting a whole of nation approach during those conflicts.

Labor is one underappreciated crucial piece of the federal agency puzzle that will be needed to wage total war. Examining this enables strategic leaders to expand their understanding of the interagency environment and deeply consider the whole of government approach that other federal agencies will have in supporting long term LSCOs. From the projection of power via the Departments of Transportation and Commerce, promoting sustainably food production through the Department of Agriculture, to a truly countless host of other non-military entities, the nation will not emerge victorious without understanding how a whole of nation approach and how inter-agencies contribute to the overall war effort during LSCOs. **IAJ**

Notes

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