

The British Empire as a Military Power.—III.

BY A STAFF OFFICER.—From Illustrated Naval and Military Magazine.

[Continued from page 109.]

THE fallacy at the root of our military system, and it is a very serious one, is the belief that invasion and attack can be warded off by purely defensive measures. Because our policy is non-progressive, it is thought that our forces must be used only to repel an invader. Such an attitude, however, is not only not calculated to promote the safety of the empire; on the contrary, it is a direct invitation to other nations to attack us. The defensive has no existence as a principle, and a permanent attitude either in strategy or tactics. A nation's security, so far as its military and naval forces are concerned, depends upon its power of injuring an enemy. Germany is the best example of a nation whose policy is defensive. She is secure from attack because of the injury she can inflict upon an assailant. So thoroughly is the necessity for holding correct views upon this point recognized upon the continent that the term "defensive" is now rendered "temporizing"; this implies that the defensive attitude is only adopted temporarily with a view to enable the side which temporizes eventually to attack the enemy. It was just in this sense that our troops acted in the Peninsular War and at Waterloo, when they acquired such a reputation for acting on the defensive. In strategy the necessity of proceeding to the attack of an enemy is greater than in tactics, for by so doing a nation keeps a war off its own soil and transfers it to that of an enemy. A very good example of the English view of the part we are expected to play in war is furnished by Mr. Arnold Forster. He suggests that we should "inform our enemies, if we have any, that if they wish to quarrel with us they must take to the water to get satisfaction." The fallacy involved in this proposition is very apparent. Whatever the cause of quarrel might be, our interests demand that we should take the initiative and attack the enemy where he is most vulnerable. The very last thing to be desired is that he should come and attack us. An invitation to him to meet us on the sea would probably be met with an answer no less evasive than that returned to the king of mediæval history who challenged his adversary to come forth from his battlements and meet him in the open field.

But our system is not only one of unqualified defence; it is one of disconnected local defence. Each colony has no more to do with the defensive arrangements of its neighbors than if they had no connection whatever with each other, and no common interests. Nor are the defensive forces, discordant as they are in organization, available to contribute to the carrying out of my general plan. Each little force is at the disposal of the government of its colony, and even allowing for the greatest patriotism and the best motives on the part of the different colonies, it is hardly possible that they should all agree in one method of action and follow it out to the end. Under the present circumstances a great war could hardly fail to end in the separation from us of some of our possessions. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that those ministers who are responsible for withdrawing the regular troops from the colonies and for calling into existence the system of local defensive forces, had not accepted and digested the idea of ultimate separation when they inaugurated this measure. At any rate they understood that each colony was responsible for its own defence, and that no colony could help or expect assistance from its neighbor. Any system of defence more extravagant, more opposed to all recognized principles, and more likely to lead to disaster, it is impossible for human ingenuity to devise. With everything at our disposal to make us powerful and secure, we are now weak and unprotected.

Commencing with the data that we have numerical forces amply sufficient for our requirements, and that the military expenditure of Great Britain and her colonies is at least as great as needful, no reasonable man can doubt that the defensive strength of the empire might be enormously increased by adopting an organization based upon strategical considerations. We require a system of defence which should be co-operative, and, above all, we require that the empire should be defended outside of its own territory. For this purpose our powers of offence should be increased. The measures which should be adopted in dealing with existing forces are those of unification and consolidation. The hundred and one petty independent forces should be converted into one imperial army. These forces may be divided into three classes: 1st, those permanently embodied, or regular forces; 2nd, forces periodically embodied, or militia; and, 3rd, volunteers. The first should be available for combined operations in any part of the world; the second should undertake the task of garrisoning Imperial fortifications, and also should be made available, in a limited degree, to act in conjunction with regular troops, and the last should be charged with the duty of local defence. The permanently embodied forces of Canada, Australia and South Africa would thus become integral parts of the regular Imperial army, and their officers would be commissioned in the same way as those of the regular forces at present. The officers and non-commissioned officers should be available to serve in every part of the world, and it would be highly desirable, for this reason, to affiliate the colonial regular forces with those of Great Britain, so that they might pass periodically from one to the other. The rank and file should be enlisted in the colonies, as at present, not only in order to save the cost of transport from England, and to create a reserve in each colony, but also because the best men, from a physical point of view, are to be found there. The officers should be obtained as at present, except that every facility should be accorded to candidates from the colonies, either by establishing military colleges in them, by holding examinations there simultaneously with those in England, so that the competition should be open to all, or by offering to each part of the empire a number of commissions proportionate to its share in the Imperial army.

All forces periodically embodied should be put upon one footing, as far as local necessities will admit, and organized as militia. The officers of these troops should be

residents of the locality to which they belong, but officers and non-commissioned officers from the regular army should be attached to them for instructional purposes. It is greatly to be desired that the sphere of action of the militia should be considerably extended. In time of war it should be made available to assist in the defence of every part of the empire, and it should also be used for guarding lines of communication and for garrisoning Imperial fortifications. The militia of Great Britain might well lead the way in a reform in this direction. At present it cannot be sent out of the United Kingdom, except, with the consent of the officers and men, to garrison the Mediterranean fortresses. If it was available in time of war for service in other parts of the world, it is hardly likely that the force would be less popular, and we should get rid of a restriction which has nothing to recommend it but its antiquity.

Lastly, the volunteer system should be encouraged and developed in every part of the empire. This form of defensive force has taken root in almost every colony, and it is now firmly established on a solid basis. The volunteers, also, should be instructed by officers and non-commissioned officers from the regular army. In time of war they should undertake the duties of local defence, and should set free, as far as possible, the other troops. Both volunteers and militia should be brought into intimate connection with the regular forces, and should be available to operate with them when employed in the same locality. Volunteers and militia should possess a proper proportion of field-artillery. It is much to be regretted that the extraordinary tenacity with which the military world clings to prejudices once taken up has been the means of limiting the rôle of the auxiliary services to that of garrison troops. Foreign nations, however, find no difficulty in organizing reserve batteries in time of war, the horses of which are not maintained in peace time, and there is no doubt that we could do the same. We are informed that field guns are to be issued to the volunteers, and it may be hoped that this will be the means of removing the prejudice against the organization of reserve batteries which has lasted so long, as well as of making the auxiliary forces available for independent action in the field.

The conversion of all local forces into parts of an Imperial army necessarily involves the condition that these forces should no longer be at the disposal of the governments of the different colonies, except in time of peace, and perhaps, also, in case of local expeditions. Instead of paying for their forces as at present, the colonies should contribute a sum equivalent to their military expenditure towards the maintenance of the Imperial army. It follows, equally, that each colony should have a voice in the organization, administration and distribution of the army proportionate to the sum it contributes. The fundamental principle, however, should be that the whole of the colonial forces form one army, and that in time of war each part of the army should assist, directly or indirectly, according to its constitution, in the defence of any Imperial territory that might be threatened.

It will probably occur to the reader that the colonies would never consent to be deprived of their regular troops during war. This objection, however, has been met by the recent action of the colonies themselves. In 1885 the Australian Governments agreed, when war appeared to be imminent, that war losses should not fall upon the districts attacked by an enemy, but should be shared by all the colonies of Australasia. This arrangement might well be applied to every part of the empire, and individual interests would thus be secured against danger.

The necessity for the creation of an Imperial army is urgent, the times are threatening, and the present occasion is favorable. A conference of colonial delegates has assembled to discuss the question of Imperial defence. If this conference does not sign the death-warrant of local defence, another opportunity may never be offered. The colonies are growing with enormous strides; the military forces of some of them have recently been largely augmented, and they will probably increase with the increase of the population, and will become more and more welded into the social and political systems of the different countries. Change must be introduced before change is possible. Nor can any terms be too great to offer the colonies that they may accept the proposal. The officers of the colonial forces should receive commissions in the Imperial army as officers either of regulars, militia or volunteers. Each colony should be allowed its legitimate share of influence in all questions connected with the army. It follows, also, that the colonies must be allowed some voice in the foreign policy of the empire.

The increase of power which will result from unifying and consolidating our defensive system must be apparent to anyone with the most elementary notion of strategy. The numerous local forces, which have little individual value and no collective value whatever, will be converted into an army of great numerical strength. Our strength for defensive purposes will then be very great, because our power of offence will be so much increased. We shall also have the whole resources of the colonies, in men, in horses, and in war material, thrown open to us in a far more direct manner than at present. The advantages thus secured cannot be over-rated. The colonies contain the best material in the world for making soldiers on the shortest notice, men of good physique and of adventurous disposition, who are accustomed to a rough life in the open. Lastly an army common to every part of the empire would be a bond to promote the closer union of Great Britain with the colonies. The regular circulation of officers and non-commissioned officers between the colonies and England would make this connection more real, and would strengthen the ties of interest and relationship which are likely, under present circumstances, to become gradually weaker.

When we possess an army such as has been pictured here, we can afford to be far less affected by questions of European politics than at present. We shall have no occasion to be nervous that our interests are being endangered at every turn. Nor can the argument recently advanced by Lord R. Churchill, that a strong army is a dangerous weapon, because a nation possessing it is tempted to use it rashly, be taken seriously, at any rate as applied to the British empire. Our statesmen must understand too well the enormous loss and suffering which a great war, even if the issue were successful, would inflict upon us, to resort to arms, except under circumstances of the direst necessity. Political interest no less than patriotism urges them to keep the peace. When we are strong, our enemies will also have a strong motive to avoid war with us, the knowledge that we have the power of injuring them seriously. At present, the motive is entirely wanting. Foreign nations know well, probably better than we do, that, if war were declared to-morrow, we should commence it with at least one arm in fetters.