



## Mind the Gap

By Thomas Donnelly

*The distance between the strategic objectives of America's national security policy and the institutional capabilities of its military is large—and growing. Around the world, the U.S. Armed Forces—and particularly, the U.S. Army—are increasingly tasked with low-level, long-term counterinsurgency operations against al Qaeda and its allies. But rather than transforming the force for the operational realities of the global war on terror, the new National Military Strategy seems to treat these missions as an afterthought or, in Pentagonese, “a lesser included case.” If the United States is to prevail, it is vital that next year's Quadrennial Defense Review address the ends-means gap between an ambitious strategy and a force ill-designed to accomplish it.*

One third of the U.S. garrison in Korea will be withdrawn and redeployed by the end of 2005. An even more substantial drawdown of forces from Germany is coming soon. Recently, General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged that troop levels in Iraq would remain at roughly 140,000 through the end of 2005—three or four times the level originally planned. The military is gearing up for a third rotation of forces for Operation Iraqi Freedom, planning to return many of the units that conducted the initial invasion for another year of counterinsurgency operations. Fully 40 percent of the current Iraq force consists of reservists called to extended, eighteen-month tours on active duty. The army has announced that the cadre regiments from its premier combat training centers will be sent to Iraq as well. The Pentagon, not for the first time, has issued a “stop-loss” order preventing soldiers from leaving the army while their units are in Iraq.

Force levels in Afghanistan swelled this spring to approximately twenty thousand, a figure many times greater than the number of troops employed to drive the Taliban from power. Their mission to hunt down Taliban and al Qaeda insurgents along the Pakistani border—operating independently

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from the smaller NATO peacekeeping contingents deployed in the rest of the country—appears likely to stretch into the foreseeable future.

A decade after retreating from Somalia, American troops have returned to the Horn of Africa, establishing a joint task force to detect, disrupt, and destroy Islamist insurgents operating in the region. Special Forces and Marines have likewise been dispatched to the wastelands of the southern Sahara to aid African governments in patrolling the “ungoverned spaces” that provide safe haven and transshipment points to terrorist groups.

Welcome to the post-Soviet, post-Saddam world, in which the United States has begun to recognize its need to preserve, protect, and expand the remarkably peaceful and liberal international order. These are the long-term, low-level counterinsurgency missions that the U.S. military, and in particular the U.S. Army—a shadow of its Cold War self—are struggling to carry out. And without significant institutional reform, this is a struggle that the United States is capable of losing.

### Now It Matters

Among the most important tasks of the president elected this November will be to oversee the

coming Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The gap between America's strategic reach and its military grasp has reached a point of crisis; the U.S. ability to secure its vision of a liberal and increasingly democratic international order is the central question of international politics in the twenty-first century. The task of closing the gap transcends party or political ideology. Indeed, it is inherent to the preservation of America's position as global superpower and the great-power peace that has marked the "post-Cold War" era. It is a matter of securing the lives, liberty, and pursuits of happiness not only of Americans, but of American friends and allies—and those who would become so—around the world. Thus a previously innocuous piece of bureaucratic busywork becomes crucial.

Closing this gap is a task that previous defense reviews have failed to accomplish; arguably, many of them helped create it. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, the Department of Defense has conducted three major assessments: the "Bottom-Up" review of 1993 and the QDRs of 1997 and 2001. Outside the Pentagon, there has been a national defense panel, designed to provide an independent assessment of the 1997 QDR, and commissions on the roles and missions of the armed forces, as well as the broader national security challenges of the twenty-first century—most famously, the so-called "Hart-Rudman" commission. There have also been at least as many private studies—including one by this author, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century*, published in September 2000.

Yet none of these reviews fully forecast the strategic and military realities of our post-September 11 world. Most of them warned of the danger of terrorism, but few suggested that the appropriate response would be to extend a "generational commitment," as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has put it, to "transform" the despotic and dysfunctional regimes of the greater Middle East. Almost none recommended the invasions of Afghanistan or Iraq.

Those that warned of a growing great-power challenge from the People's Republic of China did not contemplate the containment of Beijing within the context of a global war on terrorism. U.S. strategic interests in South Asia were likewise viewed through the narrow lens of nuclear nonproliferation. And Africa—when it was mentioned at all—was understood as a humanitarian or epidemiological problem, hardly a serious matter for defense or national security strategy.

To be fair, none of these previous studies, including the 2001 QDR, had the benefit of the guidance of the Bush Doctrine, as expressed in *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, published in September 2002.<sup>1</sup> While the Bush Doctrine is better understood as establishing a set of strategic goals rather than a coherent "how-to" approach to achieve them, it does provide a vital benchmark. This is essential for intelligent Pentagon planning and for attempting to answer the central question of any defense program: how much is enough? Recent defense reviews have had to assume—or to manipulate—the strategic ends while judging the necessary military means. As such, they were castles built on air.

In some ways, the sharpest ends-means dichotomy is between the Bush Doctrine of 2002 and the Bush administration's defense review of 2001. Though the QDR was published before *The National Security Strategy*, they were spawned in vastly different geopolitical eras. The attacks of 9/11 marked a sharp break in the Bush administration's own thinking and brought the president himself to center stage in strategy-making. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have sharpened the break: no longer is there talk of a decades-long "strategic pause" wherein the United States could ready itself for the rise of China or some other peer competitor. Constabulary "nation-building" missions can no longer be dismissed as the feckless squandering of U.S. troop strength, but rather must be embraced as key struggles for "hearts and minds" in the global war on terror. And transforming the military to be a more efficient firepower machine now seems secondary to transforming the force to execute its manpower-intensive missions patrolling and expanding the American security perimeter. Indeed, had the course plotted in the 2001 QDR been pursued more fully, it is arguable that the United States would be even less prepared for the post-9/11 world than it is today.

## A Pentagon in Denial

In recent months, the Bush administration has come to entertain the possibility that there are shortcomings in the planning assumptions embedded in its defense program. Yet if draft versions of the "National Military Strategy"—the "message" of General Myers "to the Joint Force on the strategic direction the Armed Forces of the United States should follow"—reflect the state of Defense Department thinking, there is still great reluctance to face up to the full consequences of the president's vision.

In the Pentagon, a debate over the current level of U.S. commitment to the Middle East persists. The hope is that large-scale operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the region represent a temporary spike in activity, not the new baseline of engagement. While Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has retreated from his insistence against increasing the strength of the active-duty army, he resists taking any formal, legislative steps to permanently increase its size.

Thus the “National Military Strategy” retains the 2001 QDR’s “1-4-2-1” force-sizing construct. This prescribes “a force sized to defend the homeland, deter forward in and from four regions, and conduct two, overlapping ‘swift defeat’ campaigns.” Further—and most notably—the “National Military Strategy” states that “the force must be able to ‘win decisively’ in one of these two campaigns.”<sup>2</sup>

The events of the past year, and particularly the extended counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq, reveal how bankrupt this thinking is. Operation Iraqi Freedom began precisely as such a “swift defeat” campaign (and, notably, achieved its regime-removal purpose with a smaller force than planned). But winning decisively in Iraq (or Afghanistan, for that matter) has proven a significantly tougher task and an intrinsically longer obligation than imagined by the E-Ring. Simply put, counterinsurgency missions are won neither decisively nor swiftly. Even as the United States accomplishes key political goals in Iraq—including the return of sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government and the organization of democratic elections—it retains an obligation to help a liberated Iraq defend itself from enemies foreign and domestic. This is the substantial “deter forward” mission that looms after the “win decisively” work is done.

Even as the number of these fairly well-delineated missions is increasing, the new “National Military Strategy” buries an improvised explosive device into its “baseline security posture”: the U.S. regional commands are now to regard the activities of the global war on terrorism as part of their normal, day-to-day duties. Even setting aside Iraq and Afghanistan, the range of these activities over the past two years has been substantial and staggeringly disparate. Operations have extended from Central Asia to the jungles of the Philippines. As the draft of the “National Military Strategy” itself acknowledges: “The extremely demanding circumstances associated with the ongoing [war on terrorism] are likely to endure for the foreseeable future. Because post-conflict and [war on terrorism] operations are likely of long duration and will vary in intensity, planners must

account for the capabilities required to achieve campaign objectives.”<sup>3</sup>

A third shortcoming of the strategy’s force-sizing construct is its fantasy of “disengagement.” It is worth recalling that the Bush administration came to power ridiculing the Clinton administration’s attachment to the Balkans. Despite some initial reductions in force levels, American soldiers—now entirely reservists—still perform these missions. Plans are afoot to finally withdraw from Bosnia (although the political and strategic wisdom of such a move is dubious), but not from Kosovo, which remains poised on the edge of conflict. The strategy draft cannot seem to make up its mind about this dilemma: “While the force-planning construct assumes that the United States will disengage from some contingencies when faced with a second overlapping campaign, there may be some lesser contingencies that the United States is unwilling or unable to terminate quickly.” Polonius could not have said it more clearly.

Finally, the Pentagon does seem to have realized that there are opportunity costs for its project of “force transformation.” Far from being the cheap solution to military effectiveness, transformation is, essentially, an additional mission for a smaller force. Says the strategy: “Force sizing and design must look beyond current operations.” The institutional health of the armed services is the rock on which fielded forces are built:

The health of the force rests on the ability to generate, sustain and transform capabilities over the long term. Sizing the force must include an appreciation of the force requirements to support ongoing training activities, “in-stride” transformation and other programs that may restrict the availability of forces and capabilities provided to combatant commanders.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, “transformation” is becoming indistinguishable from “modernization,” a more prosaic kind of change more familiar to soldiers and less appealing to Toffleresque minds.

## Accepting Strategic Realities

It is the job of the next administration to begin at last to close the gap between strategic ends and military means. President Bush has articulated a bold new vision of the world the United States should help build; one can only describe it as a quintessentially American

strategy, appealing to the fundamental human desire for freedom. Thus far, candidate Kerry has been the conservative, even reactionary, voice in the foreign policy debate: while nosing forward a proposal to expand the army, he suggests he would be happy to do business with the entrenched autocrats of the Middle East. His attitude toward soldiering is that of a volunteer, citizen soldier: he thinks of military professionals as something akin to a labor union rather than hard-bitten “regulars,” men and women genuinely devoted to service and their services. He did his duty courageously in Vietnam but seems curiously out of touch with the ethos that informs those who would make a life in the military.

Whatever the outcome of the election, the end-means gap must be addressed. We can no longer expect

an undersized force to execute such an ambitious strategy. Conversely, scaling our strategy to the limits of our current force means retreat—and ultimately, defeat.

## Notes

1. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, September 2002).
2. Richard B. Myers, “National Military Strategy of the United States of America, 2004: A Strategy for Today; a Vision for Tomorrow,” undated draft, 18.
3. Myers, “National Military Strategy,” 18–19.
4. Myers, “National Military Strategy,” 19.