



New Thinking, Old Realities

By Frederick W. Kagan

The world did not change as much as many people thought immediately after September 11, 2001. Traditional rules of power politics and means of fighting wars remain remarkably robust. What has changed is that America has become confused about its place in the world and how the world works.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led to immediate proclamations that everything had changed. President George W. Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and countless analysts, soldiers, and journalists declared that we faced a “new kind of war” and unprecedented challenges to our way of thinking. They argued for transformation of the military, the government, and our entire approach to foreign policy. In the five years since, the administration has rejected almost every past approach to war. Any new idea has been seen as good; any idea with ties to the past is old-think. This pursuit of novelty has had mixed results. In the direct confrontation with al Qaeda, the United States is, for the moment, doing rather well. In virtually every other theater of conflict, the “new new thing” is leading to disaster.

The search for novelty in foreign affairs and military conflict is not itself new. As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it brought down with it five decades of apparent simplicity in the world. From 1941 to 1991, America’s enemy was totalitarianism, whether German, Japanese, Soviet, or Chinese. The only tool those enemies understood, we thought, was force or the threat thereof, so we relied on our economic superiority to build up military power that would deter or, when necessary, defeat known adversaries. It worked; we overcame

or deterred each of these foes in turn. But the end of the Cold War brought only questions about what would come next. George H. W. Bush declared the beginning of a “new world order,” but did not define it. He and Bill Clinton launched the United States into a series of peacekeeping missions that many thought would characterize America’s role in the world for decades to come. Others spoke of a “strategic pause,” even of “the end of history.” The truth was that many leaders and analysts assumed that the traditional rules of power politics had come to an end, but they did not know which new rules, if any, would define the international order. American foreign policy was disorientated and confused even before September 11, 2001, and since then, it has only become worse.

New-Think

One of the assumptions of American strategists since the end of the Cold War has been that America’s conventional military strength is now so great that it is irrelevant; no enemy can match our conventional forces, it is said, so none will be foolish enough to try. Future enemies will instead seek “asymmetrical” means of attacking us, such as terrorism, guerrilla warfare, cyberwarfare, biological agents, and so on. Conventional military power is helpless against these kinds of threats, according to many analysts, military commanders, and civilian leaders. Most have favored high-tech solutions to the problem—unmanned aerial vehicles, precision-

Frederick W. Kagan (fkagan@aei.org) is a resident scholar at AEI. His latest book, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy*, was published in September 2006 by Encounter Books.

guided weapons, and sophisticated communications technologies. Others have argued instead for lower-tech solutions, such as increasing the numbers of Special Forces troops, Navy SEALs, and CIA operatives. Almost all have condemned the “dinosaurs” of conventional military forces as hopelessly out-of-date.

Rumsfeld has quietly set about terminating the deployment of American forces in Europe by claiming that U.S. troops stationed in Kansas and Colorado are more readily “deployable” for missions in the Middle East than those based in Germany.

The Bush administration has attempted to use novel approaches in its struggles against al Qaeda and in Iraq. No conventional forces were present in Afghanistan during the first phase of the war in 2001, which instead revolved around American Special Forces working with Afghan militias to overthrow the Taliban. Then-deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz and others explicitly argued that this “Afghan model” should be the basis for strategy in Iraq as well. The attack plan in 2003 did not go quite this far, but Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks, commander in chief of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), held firmly to the conviction that it was essential to keep the number of ground forces deployed to an absolute minimum. They relied less on Special Forces than on air power, insisting that their new approach was better.

As the insurgency mushroomed in Iraq, Rumsfeld and the new CENTCOM commander, General John Abizaid, continued to seek novel approaches to the war. Eschewing traditional theories of fighting insurgencies, they focused on training indigenous Iraqi forces and pursuing various political initiatives to bring the insurgents to heel, to the exclusion of many other vital tasks. There were not enough Special Forces troops available for these traditional missions, so Abizaid worked to turn many conventional troops into a sort of “Special Forces Lite”: armored battalions now train Iraqis and conduct economic reconstruction and political redevelopment at the lowest level. The “new new thing” has triumphed again.

Perhaps the most ballyhooed of CENTCOM’s efforts at new-think was the focus on the Combined Joint Task

Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA). This task force of about 1,400 Americans combined elements of all the armed services to work within the Horn of Africa to solve problems and defuse crises without ever using conventional military power. CENTCOM briefers, pressed by unpleasant questions about how things were going in Iraq, would often try to change the subject to CJTF-HOA, their revolutionary new effort to control a region without using conventional military power at all.

Rumsfeld did not restrict the search for novel approaches to the Middle East. He has also ordered the withdrawal of thousands of American soldiers from South Korea for the first time since 1950. When Jimmy Carter tried to do the same thing in the 1970s, the realities of the world and American domestic politics prevented it. But Rumsfeld argued that American air power would be an even better deterrent against a North Korean attack without ground forces. Conventional ground forces would not only be irrelevant in such a conflict, he argued, but would also likely become hostages to North Korean artillery and missiles. Rumsfeld has quietly set about terminating the six-decade-long deployment of American forces in Europe under an even more bizarre claim: U.S. troops stationed in Kansas and Colorado are more readily “deployable” for missions in the Middle East than those based in Germany. In every theater and in every conflict, the Bush administration has tried to do things differently, suiting its strategies to what it sees as a confusing world in which old truths are no longer true.

Successes and Failures

The most successful part of the administration’s strategy has been, surprisingly, the struggle against al Qaeda. According to the apostles of novelty, this should have been the greatest challenge of all for the supposedly hide-bound U.S. security structure. Yet a combination of conventional and unconventional approaches has kept this threat largely under control. The administration applied conventional military power (primarily bombers) in a supposedly novel way in Afghanistan to remove the Taliban from power and chase al Qaeda to the hills. Since then, aggressive intelligence, special forces, and covert operations have kept al Qaeda’s leadership on the run and broken up or preempted a number of attempts to attack the United States again. Al Qaeda’s leaders spent 2004 telling each other that they were losing, and the evidence was on their side. Cellular terrorist organizations like al Qaeda are resilient, however; its leaders are still at

large and its threat persists. In particular, were the United States to relent in its direct military pressure on this organization, it is highly likely that al Qaeda or splinter groups would prepare a more successful attack. It is possible that they will do so anyway, but to date, the Bush administration has succeeded beyond anyone's expectations in defeating the most novel threat we face.

In traditional realpolitik terms, the United States should be in a good position to pressure the Iranians to abandon their program. . . .
But the Bush administration does not think in terms of traditional power politics.

Efforts to find new solutions for supposedly new problems elsewhere have not worked out as well. The "small footprint" approach in Afghanistan and Iraq has led to disaster. In Afghanistan, the failure to complete the defeat of the Taliban through a significant occupation has allowed it to regroup. The Taliban poses a significant insurgent challenge once again, and Afghan president Hamid Karzai's government no longer appears resilient.

In Iraq, the small footprint used in major combat operations clearly facilitated the rise of the insurgency. The slavish adherence to the "new" doctrines of a small footprint and putting the Iraqis in the lead on internal security has led to disaster. American forces were never allowed to establish security in Iraq and efforts to turn responsibility over to an unprepared and predominantly Shiite Iraqi military added to that failure.

The poster child for the new approach to conflict, CJTF-HOA, has also suffered an unheralded catastrophe. Radical Islamists have seized control of the southern part of Somalia, including the capital. They are setting up sharia courts and apparently receiving aid from al Qaeda-related groups. CJTF-HOA was unable to do much more than watch as al Qaeda worked to develop yet another base from which to operate.

The new approaches that the administration has pursued in the traditional area of nuclear nonproliferation are also leading to disaster. North Korea has openly avowed its possession of nuclear weapons—violating the Non-Proliferation Treaty it signed—and is now testing missiles of increasing range on which to place those weapons. The United States has been apathetic and

helpless in the face of this growing threat, now made even worse with Pyongyang's recent claim to have conducted an underground nuclear test.

Iran has violated international norms and agreements repeatedly in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. This is a particularly interesting case to test the virtues of new-think against the old. In traditional realpolitik terms, the United States should be in a good position to pressure the Iranians to abandon their program. We have allies on both sides of Iran and hundreds of thousands of troops near both Iranian borders. We should have an enormous advantage. But the Bush administration does not think in terms of traditional power politics. Instead, we have declared our determination to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan as quickly as possible, which, combined with internal collapses in both countries resulting in part from our flawed strategies, have given the Iranians leverage over us. Tehran holds Washington hostage by threatening to destabilize Iraq further, and the United States responds with fear and appeasement.

Past as Future

The result of all of this new-think is impending disaster on many fronts. Iraq and Afghanistan are in danger of failing. North Korea already has nuclear weapons and will soon be able to deploy them against the continental United States. Iran is well on its way to nuclear capability. Somalia is falling into the hands of militant Islamists, and the situation there may well destabilize the entire region. Why are we doing so badly in the world?

The answer is that the world did not change as much in 2001—or in 1991, for that matter—as many observers thought. Our enemies did not, in fact, abandon traditional power politics. Misconceived though it might have been, Saddam Hussein fought a conventional war in 2003. Even Osama bin Laden rallied his terrorists to fight as conventional soldiers in 2001, digging trenches and setting up machine guns as the Taliban lost a lopsided conventional campaign. Iran maintains a large conventional army, which it has been modernizing as rapidly as possible. So does North Korea. Both are pursuing nuclear weapons in the most conventional way possible—not as terrorist-style suitcase bombs, but as Soviet-style missile-mounted warheads. Far from being impressed by our adoption of novel strategies—withdrawal from South Korea on the one hand and a small footprint in Iraq and Afghanistan on the other—the Iranians have seized the advantage in a very traditional way. They have seen that we are bogged down

and distracted, that our conventional forces are overstretched, and that the danger of a U.S. attack is therefore very small. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is seizing the moment with traditional diplomatic delaying tactics while his scientists race to give him the weapons he desires. There is absolutely nothing novel in any of this.

America's conventional military strength remains critical.

It is time to wake up from the dream world of the 1990s. If history ended with the end of the Cold War, it has since started up again with a vengeance. Beyond al Qaeda, the United States today faces a host of traditional challenges. Large conventional militaries in Iran and North Korea support regimes seeking to develop nuclear arsenals. These threats can be deterred or defeated for certain only through the use or convincing threat of using conventional forces, because these regimes recognize no restraints on their behavior other than those imposed by superior power. The seizure of territory in Somalia by groups ideologically tied to our primary foe is reminiscent of Communist insurgencies in the Third World, which we fought during the Cold War with varying degrees of success. The insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan are unusual in some ways, but share common features with many other past insurgencies. Basic lessons from past counterinsurgencies should inform our approach to these challenges.

Above all, America's conventional military strength remains critical, traditional power politics continue to control the world, and the lessons of thousands of years of human history still apply. In counterinsurgencies, the first requirement of success is the establishment of security throughout the country or region. This task is manpower-intensive and incompatible with a small footprint approach. Political, economic, and reconciliation tracks are not sustainable without security, as countless historical examples show. Success in Iraq—and Afghanistan—

requires a heavier deployment of U.S. forces with orders not just to train indigenous soldiers, but also to bring peace to those troubled lands.

Military strength and the visible will to use it is also essential to persuading regimes like those in Tehran and Pyongyang to abandon programs they wish to pursue. We have been trying the diplomatic approach, unsupported by meaningful military threat, for nearly fifteen years with North Korea, and the result has been utter failure. A similar approach in Iran will not be more successful. It may not be necessary to attack those two states to force them to give up their weapons of mass destruction programs, but there is no hope of convincing them to do so if they do not believe that we can and will defeat them. Nor is there any likelihood that a "small footprint" (almost a "no footprint") approach in the Horn of Africa will contain the Islamist threat there.

The United States is at war, and the enemy is the same one we have been fighting for sixty years. A totalitarian regime controls North Korea. Totalitarian ideologues hold power in Iran, have just seized power in southern Somalia, and seek power throughout the Middle East. Their goals are subtly different, but they share several key features: the destruction of democracy, which they hate; the elimination of liberalism and religious toleration; and the destruction of the United States.

Victory will require a mobilization of America's military might and the willingness to use it. Adaptive and unpredictable enemies like al Qaeda will require us to change part of our approach and some of our forces constantly. Winning throughout the Muslim world will require economic, political, and cultural initiatives alongside the use of military power. But nothing will be possible without adequate military force, which the United States is currently lacking. If we do not begin the necessary mobilization of our resources now, then our military power will become irrelevant, our strategies will fail, and our security will falter.

AEI research assistant Laura Conniff and editorial assistant Evan Sparks worked with Mr. Kagan to edit and produce this National Security Outlook.