



**FINDING THE TARGET:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN MILITARY POLICY**

By Frederick W. Kagan

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Success in war depends on more than equipment or well-trained personnel. It also depends on a clear, reasonable, and well-articulated idea of how to fight. In *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (Encounter Books, September 2006), AEI scholar and military historian Frederick W. Kagan shows that many of the problems America has encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in part from misguided transformation efforts based on a misunderstanding of the nature of war. Kagan argues that efforts since the 1990s to apply business models to the conduct of war have led to a search for military efficiency that has reduced military effectiveness. The failure of U.S. Central Command's plans for the defeat of the Taliban and Saddam loyalists, as well as the failure to prepare for the post-war challenges the United States would face, were in large part a result of the wrong turn American military policy took in the 1990s. These problems stem from a fixation on the technical tasks of locating and destroying targets rather than on the political and human elements of war.

According to Kagan, three major transformations undertaken by the U.S. military since the Vietnam War created the excellent armed forces of the first Gulf War, but also sowed the seeds of failure in Iraq:

1. The elimination of the draft in 1972 and the move to an all-volunteer force fundamentally changed the capabilities of the U.S. military, as the superior skills and motivation of longer-serving volunteers laid the basis for a major transformation of ground combat.
2. Fear of Soviet expansion in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as Air Force and Navy failures in Vietnam, resulted in the development of a new generation of weapons systems in the 1970s and the technological transformation of ground forces. The 1980s therefore saw the deployment of stealth aircraft, advanced communications and information-gathering systems, and long-range precision munitions. These technological advancements came alongside major theoretical developments, including the growth of a new strategic culture in the Navy, a new

operational culture in the Army, and new concepts of air warfare in the Air Force. These technological and theoretical breakthroughs laid the groundwork for the rapid and crushing defeat of Saddam Hussein in 1991.

3. The third major change was the “information revolution” that followed the fall of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War. Excessive veneration for technology as a way of getting more bang for the buck in the 1990s shifted the focus of military planning away from real strategic thinking. Military transformation efforts focused the military more narrowly on the problems of identifying and destroying targets rather than on the problem of achieving political objectives. This flawed strategic thinking created a military preeminent at winning the war, but ready to lose the peace.

Kagan concludes in *Finding the Target* that both the military and political leaderships of the United States must abandon a notion of warfare that attempts to remove politics from combat operations and instead focus on the vital problem of today and tomorrow: how to craft military operations that do not merely defeat the enemy, but also achieve the political objectives for which war is fought.

A resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, **Frederick W. Kagan** taught military history at the United States Military Academy at West Point from 1995 to 2005. He is the author of *The End of the Old Order: Napoleon and Europe, 1801–1805* and coauthor of *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today*.

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