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What Lies "Beyond Goldwater-Nichols"?

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The question of how best to organize the U.S. military is a perennial one. Recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have raised the issue of whether the centralizing tendency of the last reorganization, the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986, is the best approach for the "Long War."

> *The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.*[1]

Thus saith Clausewitz. But beyond providing a "scriptural" source for this *Outlook*, the Eternal Prussian has a point: divining the nature of a war goes a long way toward determining how one should organize for victory.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Americans and their allies have slowly and painfully come to the conclusion that they are in a Long War to create a new political order in the Islamic world that we can better live with—that is, a region with greater inherent stability of the sort that comes from a legitimate government that is at peace with us, with its neighbors, and with its own people. We have found that we cannot comfortably accommodate, in an age of terrorism and the spread of nuclear weapons, what John Quincy Adams called "derelict" states.[2]

And so our policy strongly suggests that our strategy imitate the "clear, hold, and build" tactics that underlie the success of the Iraq surge and the progress made in the U.S. sectors of Afghanistan. Strategically, we are attempting to clear, hold (preferably through allies, rather than ourselves directly), and build on a larger level, in an effort often described as a global counterinsurgency. The policy also suggests that it is the "building" that makes for a decisive victory. That is, victory on the battlefield is not the same as victory in the war; military success is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. And a corollary is that the military's tasks—for the military's missions are rightly defined by the nation's needs and by political leaders, not by any internal structure of the armed forces—extend beyond the destruction of enemy forces.

Yet the need for "building"—which, at minimum, means state-building—means that there are missions that demand more than military power. And so there has been a lot of effort to mobilize other agencies and other elements of American power, even in cases where these other agencies are poorly suited or highly reluctant to be mobilized. Others with experience of modern counterinsurgencies, such as the Australians, often describe this as a "whole of government" approach. It is an approach that makes great common sense, but one that needs to be correctly translated into an American idiom without inverting the real meaning.

The practice of interagency coordination and cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan thus far has been mostly ad hoc, though over the past year it has become more regularized, if only because

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repetition has given it a veneer of method. And this bottom-up approach has produced a good deal of success, thanks to the ingenuity and effort of the individuals on the spot. Because the military has carried the largest load and because of its predisposition to organize, plan, and develop doctrine, it has created a kind of skeleton around which the State Department and other agencies can form themselves. But it is widely understood that something more permanent is needed and that "interagency" should be more of a noun than an adjective.

The Centralizing Tendency

Many observers also believe that The Interagency should institutionalize "jointness" as the military has—that is, the separate service perspectives and prerogatives sublimated into a presumably superior synthesis and made subject to more centralized policy control. This has been the path the U.S. military has followed. Since 1942, when President Franklin Roosevelt—in another fit of ad hoc improvisation that would have long-term consequences—created the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the organization of U.S. military efforts has been steadily centralized.

Congress formalized the arrangement in 1947 with the National Security Act, which also created the Joint Staff and established regional commanders-in-chief.[3] Traditionalists viewed this formal centralizing as both unwise and a dangerous abrogation of the powers of the individual military services. "I, for one," Fleet Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, one of the great naval heroes of World War II, declared to Congress,

> am unwilling to have the Chief of the Army Air Force[s] pass on the question of whether or not the navy should have funds for building and maintaining a balanced fleet. One might just as well ask a committee composed of a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jew to save our national souls by recommending a national church or creed.[4]

And indeed, the JCS were expected to act, corporately, as the principal military advisers to the president and the secretary of defense, giving a single consensus opinion. An amendment to the law in 1949 designated a JCS chairman (though he did not have a vote in JCS deliberations) and required the chiefs to give advice to the National Security Council as well; it also transformed the "national military establishment" into the Department of Defense, and made the Navy and Army secretaries no longer members of the cabinet. Still, when Dwight Eisenhower, former commander of American and Allied forces in Europe, was elected president, he concluded that the separate services still had too much power. More legislation followed in 1958 that removed the service chiefs and secretaries from the operational chain of command and gave theater commanders full control of all assigned forces. Yet the splitting of the services' raise-train-equip functions from the unified commanders' war-fighting responsibilities introduced a problem that now has debilitating consequences: the leaders of the military services have no direct responsibility for victory in the field.

Perhaps most curiously, these basic arrangements persisted through the Vietnam War years. Though the quality of military advice dispensed by the JCS during that lengthy war was frequently terrible—most often because the advice was the lowest-common-denominator consensus that ought to have been expected from a system that rewarded groupthink and discouraged diversity of opinion—none of the immediate post-Vietnam reforms addressed the basic structures of U.S. strategy-making.[5]

Indeed, the lasting lesson of Vietnam seemed to be, "Let's never do that again." But in addition to dividing Americans politically, the Vietnam War also reinforced the reluctance of the professional military to become involved in long-running irregular wars. And though all four services had seen significant action in Vietnam, it was first and foremost a land war. Ironically, it was also a high-water mark of interagency cooperation. Yet no reformers—either civilian or uniformed—rallied to argue that the United States needed to be able to perform this sort of mission better.

After Vietnam, the U.S. military was eager to return to a more comfortable conception of its mission of preparing for large-scale regular conflicts, with Europe being the primary theater of war. Like World War II, this meant war in the industrial age—the era of the tank, the large-deck aircraft carrier, and fleets of fighters contesting for air supremacy. Nuclear weapons added a new dimension, but since these were the possessions of the great powers, they reinforced the underlying nature of international strategic competition. The nuclear age also exaggerated the importance of centralized control. Strategy-making was very nearly reduced to "crisis management." The Cuban Missile Crisis had become the paradigm of strategic decision-making; in particular, decisions had to be made rapidly and enforced rigidly. Differences of opinion, and the time needed to sort through them, were

problematic. And there was little room for divergences of view between the flagpole and the field.

The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act

After Vietnam, movement toward greater centralization regained momentum following a series of military misfortunes and strategic surprises during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first of these was the failure of the 1980 mission to rescue fifty-three Americans held hostage by the revolutionary regime in Tehran. James Locher, who as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee staff, was one of the principal authors of the reform legislation to follow, wrote:

> The military had six months to organize, plan, and train as well as fairly recent experience in conducting a mission—the Son Tay raid about ten years before. Nonetheless, only six of the eight [assigned] helicopters arrived at the rendezvous point, known as "Desert One," in the middle of Iran; one of the six that got that far suffered mechanical problems and could not proceed. That did not leave enough helicopter capacity to carry out the mission, and it was aborted. As the rescue force was departing, a helicopter collided with one of the C-130 [cargo aircraft] that were to carry commandos and helicopter fuel; eight servicemen died. The helicopter, with valuable secret documents, weapons and communications gear on board, were [*sic*] hastily abandoned. . . . How could this state of affairs have possibly arisen? It happened because the services were so separate and so determined to remain separate.[6]

Despite the failure of the Desert One raid, the procurement problems during the early years of the Reagan administration were the central issues of public concern and congressional interest. Locher believes it was a dramatic bit of testimony by retiring JCS chairman General David Jones in February 1982 that provided the initial spark that rekindled the reform movement. As Locher recalls, Jones declared, "The system is broken. I have tried to reform it from inside, but I cannot. Congress is going to have to mandate necessary reforms."[7] The House Armed Services Committee leapt to the challenge, held hearings, and rapidly produced a JCS reorganization bill that passed the Democrat-controlled House that August.

The Senate Armed Services Committee, chaired by the natty and crafty Senator John Tower (R-Texas)—who was almost a B-movie imagining of a Senate grandee—did not take up the issue until the following year. But Tower had a very different purpose: he intended to limit and thwart any reforms, particularly those that might threaten the autonomy of his beloved Navy or the Reagan administration's effort to build up the military. And, with the retirements of Jones and Army chief of staff General Edward Meyer, there was no support for change among the serving JCS.

But the reform movement gained another bit of momentum from a second seemingly botched military operation: Operation Urgent Fury, the 1983 raid on the Caribbean island of Grenada. Though the American medical students held hostage by the Marxist government of Grenada were rescued successfully, the hastily planned raid again revealed how hard it was for units of the different services to communicate or work together. Coming shortly after Desert One, it fostered "a growing perception among military reformers and Congress that the services couldn't work together in the field," recalled John Hamre, a Senate colleague of Locher's at the time and now president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "A number of the most defense-oriented members of Congress kept standing up and pointing out these military failures."

But the forces that actually conducted Operation Urgent Fury saw things rather differently. "I was in charge," Navy Vice Admiral Joseph Metcalf, who had commanded the joint-service task force, told Congress. He continued:

> I had very little guidance from [theater commander] Admiral [Wesley] MacDonald [the chief of U.S. Atlantic Command]. I felt I had the responsibility. I felt I could tell the various command elements, whether it was Army, Air Force or anybody else, what I wanted to do. They gave me guidelines, very general. I went down there and we had no mucking about from on high.[8]

Daniel Bolger, an Army officer who played an important role in planning the current Iraq surge, writes that "Urgent Fury offered a stark and welcome contrast with the grim images of burned-out helicopters in the Iranian desert" during the Desert One operation.[9]

Whatever the verdict on Urgent Fury, it was, like the Iranian rescue operation, a small operation. Both were essentially special operations writ large—raids that were inherently risky and dangerous. To take their failures as

betraying a fundamental weakness in the most basic structures of the U.S. military is a tremendous leap of logic. Certainly, compared with the failures of Vietnam, Desert One was a minor affair; Urgent Fury might have been more elegantly fought, but the result was entirely successful. It is hard to avoid the retrospective conclusion that the self-styled reformers were less interested in a detailed analysis of the campaign than in exploiting it politically to continue to centralize the organization of the Pentagon. As Hamre recalls, the Washington wisdom had been "infused"[10] with the idea that the individual services were too powerful. Crucially, Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), the former presidential candidate and conservative icon, threw his weight behind the defense reform movement. Goldwater swiftly swept away the last pockets of resistance in the Defense Department and the Reagan administration, which was at the time a lame-duck proposition politically weakened by scandal. The bill passed the Senate on a 95–0 vote. "It was the best goddammed thing I did in 35 years in the Senate," declared Goldwater.[11]

The result was the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986. The central provision of the law was to designate the JCS chairman as the principal military adviser to the civilian leadership, freeing him from the need to achieve consensus among the service chiefs. But at the same time, the JCS were cut out of the formal, operational chain of command, which now ran directly from the theater commanders to the secretary of defense. A third important provision was to encourage the development of jointness in the officer corps. It demanded that all flag and general officers have a joint-duty assignment and promulgated the idea of joint education. "Together, these measures were designed to socialize future senior officers in jointness."[12]

With congressional leaders boasting the historical importance of their handiwork—House Armed Services Committee chairman Les Aspin (D-Wisc.), later a secretary of defense in the Clinton administration, went so far as to say that the law "is probably the greatest sea change in the history of the American military since the Continental Congress created the Continental Army in 1775"[13]—the socialization process took hold quickly and proved at least rhetorically effective. No ambitious or senior officer was immediately bold enough to challenge the virtue of jointness. The chairman's new powers were exploited fully by the adroit General Colin Powell.

The success of Operation Desert Storm—it is worth recalling that many experts imagined that the first war against Iraq would be far tougher than it turned out to be—seemed to demonstrate the effectiveness of the new and centralized command relationships. This was certainly the bipartisan wisdom in Washington. *Forbes* magazine praised "[t]he extraordinarily efficient, smooth way our military has functioned in the Gulf [as] a tribute to [Goldwater-Nichols], which shifted power from individual military services to officials responsible for coordinating them."[14] It suited the vanity of the *Washington Monthly*, long a champion of centralizing military reforms, to proclaim that "Congress won the war in the Gulf." The magazine concluded that "Goldwater-Nichols helped ensure this war had less interservice infighting, less deadly bureaucracy, fewer needless casualties, and more military cohesion than any major operation in decades."[15]

A more nuanced view would have noted that the services did not so much cooperate as fight separate wars. A thirty-seven-day air campaign preceded the land invasion; the Marine thrust into Kuwait was poorly synchronized with the Army's "left hook" maneuver into southern Iraq. Saddam Hussein's belief that his army could stand up to the United States in a conventional contest did much to keep the casualty levels low, as did the superb tactical training of American forces and the huge technological advantages they enjoyed—technological advantages often seen as weaknesses by the defense reform community. Most crucially, Powell and the senior civilians of the Bush administration committed a major strategic blunder by failing to think through how the war should end. Neither the first Bush administration nor the Clinton administration could figure out what to do with Saddam, and while there was little appetite for advancing to Baghdad and removing the Iraqi dictator from power, the increasingly centralized command of U.S. armed forces only helped to narrow the discussion of alternative strategies.

In military affairs, efficiency and effectiveness are often at odds.

Thus, Goldwater-Nichols is taken as the paradigm of military effectiveness. Joint operations have become almost an end in themselves, and they have given birth to a whole new body of doctrine and requirements for every aspect of U.S. military affairs. Powell affirmed that the "performance of the armed forces in joint operations has improved significantly and Goldwater-Nichols deserves a great deal of the credit."[16] His successor as JCS chairman, General John Shalikashvili, concurred: "No other nation can match our ability to combine force on the battlefield and fight jointly."[17]

No recent military operation proved the truth of this better than the invasion of Iraq: the three-week blitzkrieg to Baghdad was a superb exercise in joint-service synchronization; the conventional resistance by even Saddam's "elite" Republican Guard was futile. But the story of Iraq since the fall of Baghdad has been something else. First of all, it has been a highly irregular and largely land war. To be sure, air power has played an important supporting role, and the broader regional war has required a good deal of maritime patrol and other forms of sea power. Nevertheless, as the U.S. mission has centered on counterinsurgency operations, the war has become less and less joint. Even within the realm of U.S. land forces, the major burden is borne by the Army.

Our recent counterinsurgency successes result, in large part, from less central direction and more autonomy for commanders on the scene.

Further, the performance of the chairmen of the JCS—Army General Hugh Shelton, Air Force General Richard Myers, Marine Corps General Peter Pace, and now Admiral Michael Mullen—in supplying military advice to the Bush administration raises a question about the system itself. While it is difficult to separate the unfortunate outcomes from the context—particularly the controlling personality of former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the more generally inbred and secretive nature of Bush and his senior lieutenants—it is fair to ask whether a more open system that accommodated rather than suppressed dissenting points of view might have served the situation better. It is not clear that former Army chief of staff Eric Shinseki really had a fuller understanding of postinvasion Iraq than others, but it is beyond argument that having a fuller discussion would have helped. Indeed, it is frequently the case in history that there is no clearly "best" military advice; the best guarantee against failure is open debate and a critical intelligence in exercising supreme command. In military affairs, efficiency and effectiveness are often at odds.

Over the past four years, the challenges of irregular warfare seem to have flummoxed both the chairmen and the JCS. They neither created nor have embraced the surge strategy in Iraq. While military strategy ought to be subordinate to civilian direction, the increasing irrelevance of the JCS (and the Joint Staff) is itself problematic. The separation of the war-fighting and raise-train-equip functions has created paralysis. Nor is the war-fighting organization performing as planned; the system of theater commanders is less than ideal. The Bush administration and Rumsfeld deserve high marks for creating U.S. Africa Command, but there is more to consider than redrawing the boundaries between unified commands. The most obvious problems lie in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) arrangements; in some ways—and contrary to the ideal imagined in the Goldwater-Nichols law—Admiral William Fallon, former CENTCOM chief, is the least important senior "war fighter" in the region. In Iraq, General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker have created a campaign plan that represents strategic guidance. And in Afghanistan, the system of command is badly confused—worse so since the advent of the NATO mission there. Though Afghanistan is in the CENTCOM theater (and CENTCOM was responsible for the original invasion), the job of day-to-day command falls to General Dan MacNeill, who reports to General Brantz Craddock, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, at NATO headquarters in Belgium. Further complicating matters is the role of U.S. Special Operations Command—which has service-like raise-train-equip powers and actively commands counterterrorism operations—itself a creation of the Goldwater-Nichols Act. In sum, it turns out that the Long War is very much a local affair, driven more by local power calculations and political conditions than by global jihadist organizations such as al Qaeda. Our recent counterinsurgency successes result, in large part, from less central direction and more autonomy for commanders on the scene.

Beyond Goldwater-Nichols

In thinking how best to organize not only the U.S. military but also the whole of government and a web of alliances to meet this Long War mission, it is worth wondering if the old path of reform and the centralizing tendencies that seemed so right for the Cold War are a good guide for the future. During his tenure as president of CSIS, Hamre has overseen a number of "Beyond Goldwater-Nichols" studies that reflect his enthusiasm for the 1986 law. One 2005 study, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era*, has proven a landmark and has done much to shape current thinking about these issues.[18]

The study strongly argues for an interagency version of the jointness that has been the product of Goldwater-Nichols and for a further centralizing of strategic planning.

> In an increasingly complex security environment, centrally coordinated planning is critical to ensuring unity of effort among a diverse array of agencies involved in the execution of a given policy or operation. . . . [A]chieving greater unity of effort across [the U.S. government] requires institutionalizing standard ways of doing business, particularly in planning and conducting interagency operations.[19]

No one would argue against a greater unity of effort on the part of the government, but the line between central planning and "decentralized execution" is a thin one. And as the study observes in its opening pages, the "most relevant [principle of organization] is that in an era of fast-moving, unpredictable challenges, government should be more agile."[20] This is precisely correct, but in the twenty years since the enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols law, it would seem that the formal military processes have become slower and more bureaucratic rather than more agile. The startling improvement in the counterinsurgency capabilities of U.S. forces has come from the bottom up—from the frantic reading of the classic literature on the subject, to the ad hoc improvisations of small unit commanders in combat, to practical wisdom circulated on websites established by soldiers and Marines, and even to the writing of the Army-Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual (which had little, if anything, to do with the turgid joint doctrinal apparatus at Joint Forces Command)—rather than from the top down. Similarly, where interagency processes have proven successful—such as provincial reconstruction teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the partnerships between Petraeus and Crocker in Baghdad or between former presidential envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Lieutenant General David Barno in Kabul—it has come from people responding to situations as they find them rather than following orders from headquarters.

Victory in the Long War can only come through a paradoxical mixture of decades of commitment to jointness and the flexibility to change direction at a moment's notice. The centralizing reforms that culminated in the Goldwater-Nichols Act did much to weld America's armed services into the preeminent military force of the late twentieth century. Whether a similar approach is appropriate for the new challenges of a new era is a question to consider carefully.

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88–89.

2. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Knopf, 1949), 327.

3. For a more detailed discussion, see Peter J. Roman and David W. Tarr, "The Joint Chiefs of Staff: From Service Parochialism to Jointness," *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 91–111.

4. Quoted in C. Kenneth Allard, *Command, Control and the Common Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 116.

5. There is, of course, a wealth of literature on the failures of military advice and supreme command in the Vietnam War, but the account that has most influenced the thinking of the current generation of officers is H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

6. James R. Locher III, "Has It Worked? The Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act," *Naval War College Review* (Autumn 2001), available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JIW/is_4_54/ai_83295124 (accessed March 4, 2008).

7. Ibid.

8. Quoted in Daniel P. Bolger, *Americans at War, 1975–1986: An Era of Violent Peace* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 346n102.

9. Ibid., 351.

10. Quoted in James A. Kitfield, "A Better Way to Run a War," *Air Force Magazine* 89, no. 10 (October 2006): 37, available at www.afa.org/magazine/Oct2006/1006war.pdf (accessed March 4, 2008).

11. Ibid.

12. Peter J. Roman and David W. Tarr, "The Joint Chiefs of Staff: From Service Parochialism to Jointness," 102.

13. Quoted in James R. Locher III, "Taking Stock of Goldwater-Nichols," *Joint Force Quarterly* (Autumn 1996): 10.

14. Malcolm S. Forbes Jr., "Fact and Comment," *Forbes*, March 18, 1991.

15. Katherine Boo, "How Congress Won the War in the Gulf," *Washington Monthly* (October 1991): 31.

16. "The Chairman as Principal Military Adviser: An Interview with Colin L. Powell," *Joint Force Quarterly* (Autumn 1996): 30.

17. General John M. Shalikashvili, "A Word from the Chairman," *Joint Force Quarterly* (Autumn 1996): 1.

18. Clark A. Murdock and Michèle A. Flournoy et al., *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2005), available at www.csis.org/ media/csis/pubs/bgn_ph2_report.pdf (accessed March 5, 2008).

19. Ibid., 20.

20. Ibid., 6.