

The Promise of Decisive Action

by Michael P. Noonan and John Hillen

The attacks of September 11 tragically reawakened the United States to the fact that the world is a hazardous place deserving renewed vigilance and a proactive foreign policy. Not only must the United States combat the threat of global terrorism, it must prepare for other dangerous foes who will be spawned by the chaos of disintegrating political regimes or sponsored by new forces rising in power. State or non-state, future enemies will be empowered by the same global trends that give terrorists access to fluid financing, decisive information, freedom of movement, and the possibility of wielding weapons of mass destruction. A few state-centered adversaries of the future (and there will be some—the death of the state and Thucydidian politics has been greatly exaggerated) might challenge the United States on roughly familiar terms of battle—ones for which America is prepared. More likely, future foes will change the rules, style, and modalities of warfare so as to strip the United States of its overwhelming advantage in conventional warfare. Non-state enemies, of which there will be many more than just Osama bin Laden, will certainly choose this latter course of action. The threats will be global and amorphous, changing form and tactics frequently while seeking constantly to increase their lethality and attack states where they are weakest. As the September 11 attacks horribly demonstrated, the wars of the future will likely contain no front lines, and America's foes will make little distinction between combatant and civilian.

While gauging these future threats is an imprecise art, there is one prediction that can be made with more certainty: it is highly improbable that in the next twenty-five to thirty years the United States will face an adversary seeking to challenge America's military in a symmetrical fashion—launching waves of fighter aircraft against the U.S. Air Force, putting to sea a massive blue-water navy, or fielding a large army of tanks, cannons, concentrated

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infantry formations, and massive logistics trains. This seemingly self-evident point is important to remember, because the American military is spending the great majority of its resources on preparing for precisely that sort of fight. While much has been made of the use in Afghanistan of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and precision-guided munitions directed to their targets by special operations forces, the fact of the matter is that, on the whole, the United States still retains a military structure largely unprepared for the realities of a new era of warfare. It retains a military establishment that seeks to fight the “Third World War,” but along fundamentally World War II or Cold War lines. The Pentagon continually improves its technology and operating methods, but only within its comfort zone. As September 11 demonstrated, future foes are far less likely to also seek incremental improvements to proven ways of waging war (especially those types of war in which the United States is most expert). In order to adapt to a world of future threats that do not resemble advanced industrial-age warfare, the United States’ military must transform itself in the areas of strategy, force structure, and personnel policies in order to provide for the nation’s security in the radically altered geostrategic environment of the early twenty-first century. As President Bush stated recently, “In September 1999, I said . . . that America was entering a period of consequences that would be defined by the threat of terror, and that we faced a challenge of military transformation. That threat has now revealed itself, and that challenge is now the military and moral necessity of our time.”¹

President Bush is learning, however, that the military will not reform itself without strong civilian leadership and a geostrategic rationale for its transformation. It is not enough simply to be told that the threats of the future are not the threats of the past: an institution expected to undertake a cultural, organizational, and doctrinal transformation must at least see the outlines of its style of warfare for the future. In this article we outline the emerging characteristics of that new style of warfare and the challenges it poses to an American military that views itself as eminently successful and is therefore tremendously hidebound. This emerging way of war, what we call Decisive Action, draws from the lessons of the three ways of American warfare that preceded it in the last half of the twentieth century: the limited war strategies of the Vietnam age, the Weinberger–Powell doctrine of overwhelming force, and the precision strikes favored in the Clinton years. But decisive action is not merely an amalgamation of the best characteristics of past doctrines, it is a way of warfare meant for the future—specifically for positioning the American military to decisively prevail over future adversaries and help serve the cause of peace and security in a rapidly changing world.

¹ “President Speaks on War Effort to Citadel Cadets,” Remarks by President Bush, The Citadel, Charleston, S.C., Dec. 11, 2001. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases>.

The American Ways of War

The “American century” was made so by the industrial strength and genius of the United States. While these national characteristics fostered the U.S. economic and political power that propelled the country to superpower status, they also shaped the American way of war and America’s strategic culture. What historian Russell F. Weigley termed the “American way of war” of the first half of the twentieth century was one that used the United States’ great industrial prowess, size, organizational talents, and entrepreneurial skills to make a military and style of warfare that was irresistible. The leitmotif of this style was the prolonged mobilization of massive American forces followed by a style of attrition-minded warfare that would eventually wear down the enemy, taking advantage of America’s superior technology and industry.² Total victory and the complete defeat of the enemy was the goal. While this approach worked well for the United States, the development of nuclear weapons and the Cold War with the Soviet Union made this style of warfare inflexible and only partially useful as a tool of statecraft in the years following World War II.

After 1949, when basic nuclear parity came about, the United States realized it needed a more flexible military doctrine than that of the total war it had waged so successfully in World War II. Total war in the context of the conflict with the Soviet Union meant a possible global nuclear confrontation. While President Eisenhower chose to deter the Soviets through the threat of massive retaliation, the many small advances made by world communism in the 1950s and early 1960s convinced strategic thinkers and eventually President John F. Kennedy that the United States needed a doctrine for the use of force that was more flexible and precise than a large industrial military bent on total victory. This strategic need saw the rise of the limited war school of American strategic thought (c. 1950–84). Limited war theory centered on the idea that military force should be applied more subtly than in pursuit of massive combat engagements leading to total battlefield and political victory. Robert Osgood, who articulated much of the new doctrine, wrote that “limited war is an essentially diplomatic instrument . . . military forces are not for fighting but for signaling.” Thomas Schelling, another limited-war theorist, noted that military force should be used to encourage a “bargaining process between belligerents” that rested on a complex theory of tacit understanding of each other’s war aims.³ Decisive military outcomes were not necessary or even desirable due to fears of the Soviet response and escalation. The

²Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of American Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1973).

³Osgood quoted in Stephen P. Rosen, “Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War,” *International Security*, Fall 1982, pp. 83–113. See also Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), Morton H. Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Wiley, 1963), and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

underlying logic was not only diplomatic, it was scientific—and physicists such as Herman Kahn, economists like Thomas Schelling, and analytically rigorous bureaucrats (Robert McNamara’s “Whiz Kids”) would be the chief architects of this style of war. To control this more subtle application of force, the strategic decisions of limited war would be highly centralized, and made by civilians.

While the American involvement in both Korea (post-MacArthur, who wanted nothing to do with limited war and said “there is no substitute for victory”) and Vietnam were expressions of this way to employ U.S. force, it was the critique of the Vietnam campaign by the U.S. military itself that led to the downfall of the doctrine. In that conflict, scientific calculations about the application of limited force against an opponent who was fighting a total war backfired. The American strategy of signaling and incrementally applying limited force reflected the hubris of Defense Secretary McNamara’s civilian strategists who thought they could “manage force, and tune violence finely.”⁴ Profoundly affected by what they saw as the fundamental misapplication of military force in Vietnam, military reformers sought to create a new doctrine (which they themselves would control) in the years following the war.⁵ For these reformers, in Vietnam the United States forgot the value of the decisive military engagement and the need to attack and destroy the enemy at his “center of gravity.” The primacy of political signaling in limited war doctrine led to needless military sacrifices on the ground and much toil that in the end did not contribute to the strategic goal of the war. Worst of all, to the post-Vietnam military reformers, this style of war ceded the initiative of action to the enemy—making him rather than the U.S. forces the decisive actor. To their minds, President Lyndon Johnson’s reluctance to widen the war in Vietnam (or at home for that matter) led to a strategy that preferred military operations that were controllable over those that were decisive and successful.

The revamped U.S. military doctrine of the 1980s restored the primacy of combat engagements and decisive military victory to American military strategy. After the failed hostage rescue attempt in Iran in 1980 and the tragedy of the bombing of the barracks at the Beirut International Airport in 1983, the Pentagon heralded the official arrival of this doctrine, generally known as overwhelming force. Articulated by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Army General Colin Powell, this strategic doctrine (c. 1984–93) was solidly rooted in what the military thought were the problems of limited war theory as applied in Vietnam. The new doctrine centered on the tenets that the U.S. military must have clear objectives, the necessary means

⁴ Former Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton quoted in Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam, The System Worked* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1979), p. 18.

⁵ Chief among those reformers was Colonel Harry Summers, who introduced the Michael Howard and Peter Paret translation of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) into the Army War College and changed Army doctrine forever.

to achieve those goals decisively, and the support of the American people.⁶ The doctrine restored the decisive battle and operational victory as the centerpiece of any strategic campaign and made much of the need for U.S. military forces to retain the initiative of action and always force their enemies to react. As the underlying logic of this doctrine had shifted away from scientific calculations and back towards the military's operational concerns, the strategic decisions were dominated by the military (or sympathetic civilian leaders). While the Reagan-era build-up of the military certainly provided policy-makers with expanded means for overwhelmingly achieving military objectives, the underlying conditions of international politics and certain legacies of the Vietnam War enforced reluctance for its use. On the one hand, the doctrine could be seen as a prescription for inaction. Only a few complex conflicts had the characteristics that could satisfy the doctrine's conditions for American military and political success. While the military drew comfort from having a doctrine that would call for them to fight only when success was assured and the cause was important, it was considered too inflexible for use by many.⁷ Moreover, a heightened sensitivity about military casualties among the political and military leaders who came of age in Vietnam underpinned the doctrine and made its employment even more inflexible. Nonetheless, the very successful uses of force in Panama and the Persian Gulf were seen as proving the value of this school for its backers.

The changed international landscape following the demise of the Soviet Union and Bill Clinton's election as president in 1992 ushered in what may be labeled as the era of precision strikes (c. 1993–01). Underlying the political logic of this doctrine were three assumptions: first, that most of the conflicts around the world in which the United States might want to use military force were over very low geopolitical stakes—and ones for which the Americans would not want to take casualties. Second, that there was a real need to retain a domestic political focus at home, as the last president had won a war but lost re-election. Third, that advances in technology allowed the United States to hit targets with great precision, from long ranges, and with minimal risk to U.S. military personnel. This doctrine was cemented after the events of October 3–4, 1993, when eighteen U.S. Army troops were killed

⁶ At the National Press Club in November 1984, Weinberger stated that force should only be used when: vital national interests are at stake; the United States intends to win; there is a reasonable assurance that Congress and the American people will support the intervention; the commitment of American forces and their objectives can be reassessed and adjusted if necessary; and the commitment of forces is a last resort. Caspar W. Weinberger, "The Uses of American Military Power," Department of Defense News Release, Nov. 28, 1984. Powell, for his part stated that U.S. policy-makers must have a clear political objective and stick to it; use all necessary force and not apologize for it; and recognize that decisive force ends wars quickly and saves lives in the long run. Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), pp. 420–21.

⁷ The prima facie example of this was the heated exchange between General Colin Powell and then Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright over intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Ibid.*, pp. 576–77; see also F. G. Hoffman, *Decisive Force: The New American Way of War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996).

in Mogadishu, Somalia, while acting to hunt down and capture Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid. Literally gunshy after that action, the Clinton administration instead largely favored the use of multilateral actions in dealing with the ethnic conflicts and humanitarian disasters of the post-Cold War era.⁸ When more unilateral uses of force were necessary, the administration chose to employ high-technology means such as air strikes and cruise missiles—these were apparent in strikes against Iraq, on Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and the El Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, and the war for Kosovo. An exception was in Haiti in 1994, which turned out not to be a mission using much coercive force but still was conducted along the overwhelming force model. Even so, there the outcome did not resemble a central political tenet of overwhelming force—decisiveness. Within two years of the United States' leaving the island it was hardly better off than before the American invasion. In the main, during the Clinton years military force was seen as a low-risk, symbolic measure with coercive overtones that was meant to show American displeasure or to shape diplomatic conditions.

Unfortunately, this pattern of action was not without consequence. First, precision-strike warfare seemed to reinforce a self-fulfilling prophecy among political leaders: the belief that the American people are not willing to take casualties.⁹ While this claim has never been proven,¹⁰ the Clinton administration's handling of both domestic and international acts of terrorism against the United States as law enforcement issues seems only to have emboldened enemy leaders such as bin Laden into the belief that if only they could bloody U.S. forces then the American people would call for immediate disengagement. The frequent bombing of empty Iraqi installations and other indecisive targets throughout the late 1990s was for Clinton an attempt to "signal" resolve. To the bin Ladens of the world it simply signaled American weakness. The events of September 11 certainly seem to show a belief by Al Qaeda that the United States was a "paper tiger" and the Bush administration would respond in similar ways as its predecessor. Second, the doctrine, intended at its core to protect the domestic political agenda from political risk abroad, left the initiative of action in the hands of the opponent. President Clinton noted frequently during the bombings of Iraq and Serbia that the leaders of those two countries could stop the U.S. action if they cooperated.

⁸See, for example, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, "Defining Mission, Setting Deadline: Meeting New Security Challenges in the post-Cold War World," Address at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., Mar. 6, 1996.

⁹The prime proponent of this school of thought has been Edward N. Luttwak. See his: "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1995, pp. 109–22, and "A Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1996, pp. 33–44.

¹⁰Several scholars have shown that the American people are willing to take combat casualties. See: James Burk, "Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia: Assessing the Casualties Hypothesis," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1999, pp. 53–78; Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "The Civil-Military Gap and Casualty Aversion," prepared for the Triangle Institute for Strategic Studies (TISS) conference on the Gap between the Military and Civilian Society, Wheaton, I.L., Oct. 1999; and Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996).

Like limited war doctrine, precision strike left America's foes, rather than the U.S. military, as the decisive actors.

Thus, far the Bush administration has practiced what we term a new decisive action doctrine. Decisive action restores the principles of decisiveness and the importance of significant combat operations and operational victories on the battlefield. However, decisive action also recognizes that the so-called "American way of war"—large industrial forces waging large-scale attritional campaigns against similarly aligned enemies—is far from useful in today's geopolitical environment. Decisive action envisions a strategy, force structure, and military personnel system that take advantage of the technological advances that give the American military the capability of being stealthier, more lethal, able to strike from longer ranges, more agile, more survivable, and able to operate without huge logistical trains or vulnerable bases near the conflict. President Bush outlined this application of force best when he stated

Our commanders are gaining a real-time picture of the entire battlefield, and are able to get targeting information from sensor to shooter almost instantly. Our intelligence professionals and special forces have cooperated . . . with battle-friendly Afghan forces . . . who know the terrain, who know the Taliban, and who understand the local culture. And our special forces have the technology to call in precision air strikes—along with the flexibility to direct those strikes from horseback, in the first cavalry charge of the 21st century.

This combination—real-time intelligence, local allied forces, special forces, and precision air power—has really never been used before. The conflict in Afghanistan has taught us more about the future of our military than a decade of blue ribbon panels and think-tank symposiums.¹¹

While we should be careful about drawing too many lessons from this one phase of the war on terrorism or the war in Afghanistan, the model as it unfolded there in the fall/winter of 2001–02 fits decisive action's combination of the limited political goals of limited warfare, the technology underpinning precision force, and yet the crucial military logic and political decisiveness underlying overwhelming force. Decisive action is both limited and precise, but by emphasizing operational military considerations (not political signaling) in the strategic calculus and by returning to a focus on decisive combat engagements and meaningful battlefield victories, it retains the initiative of action for U.S. forces. It deviates substantially from its immediate predecessor with its emphasis on risk-taking (especially with ground forces), the importance of coercive force decisively wielded to compel the enemy into a course of action on the ground, and the leveraging of high technology to wage war in a way that will soundly defeat enemy military forces while denying foes the ability to strike American forces where the United States is still vulnerable (such as large logistics bases).

¹¹ George W. Bush, "President Speaks on War Effort to Citadel Cadets."

Nonetheless, if the United States is to truly move towards a doctrine such as decisive action, it must make major changes. It must replace the dated military strategy of seeking to fight two conventional foes with a strategy that revolves around a suite of military capabilities that can be used to defeat almost any sort of foe—conventional or unconventional. In force structure, the Pentagon, Congress, and the defense industry must wean themselves off the “death spiral”¹² of procuring ever more Cold War tanks, ships and planes rather than the dramatically different military capabilities today’s technology allows and tomorrow’s battlefield successes demand. In terms of military personnel, the military must replace a backward-looking personnel system with one that encourages entrepreneurial leaders on both the battlefield and in the staff offices (Table 1).

Strategy

The tactical and operational success of the U.S. military in the Persian Gulf War proved that combating American forces in set-piece conventional battles were, at best, wantonly stupid or, at worst, suicidal. Conflicts from Somalia to Haiti to the Balkans proved that adversaries, while not always successful, had indeed learned that asymmetrical strategies worked best against the American conventional juggernaut.

Any conception of American military strategy in the war on terrorism and beyond must begin with the reality that the military is only one of many tools available for carrying out the conflict and for deterring future threats. The military will be useful in certain contingencies (such as in Afghanistan) and largely ineffective in other areas (such as interdicting Al Qaeda monetary flows, the tracking of movement of certain individuals, and using American diplomacy and informational tools to shape the international environment). Strategic planners must use the means necessary to achieve the ends of policy. When military force is necessary the goal should be two-fold: (1) to attain tactical or operational victory and (2) to ensure that such uses of force shape the international or regional political environment in ways favorable to U.S. strategic interests.

Executing the doctrine of decisive action, however, will require first and foremost that no conception of strategy can take a one-size-fits-all approach. American strategic planners must move away from illustrative planning scenarios and move towards thinking in terms of flexible military capabilities. In other words, the U.S. military will need to tailor-fit force packages to the needs of actual contingencies rather than building a force structure that is best suited for hypothetical scenarios that may or may not come to pass. Simply put, the nation cannot afford to fritter away its finite means of military power. This realization suggests that U.S. force packages

¹²John Hillen, “Defense’s Death Spiral: The Increasing Irrelevance of More Spending,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 1999.

Table 1 A Conceptualization of the Employment of U.S. Military Force, 1950–Present

	Limited war	Overwhelming force	Precision strikes	Decisive action
Time frame	1950–84	1984–93	1993–01	2001–Present
Application	Vietnam, 1963–69	Panama, 1989 Iraq, 1991	Iraq, 1993, 1996, 1998 Sudan/Afghanistan, 1998 Bosnia/Kosovo 1995, 1999	Afghanistan, 2001
Political and military objectives	Political goals overwhelm military logic/objectives	Political goals accommodate military logic/objectives	Political goals overwhelm military logic/objectives	Political goals accommodate military logic/objectives
Defining logic	Scientific	Operational	Political	Geostrategic
Control of military strategy and decision-making	Civilian policy-makers	Military commanders	Civilian policy-makers	Mixed
Initiative of action	With opponent	With U.S.	With opponent	With U.S.
Chief aim of coercive force	Send political signals	Attain operational victory	Pressure opponent/shape political environment	Attain tactical or operational victory/shape strategic environment
Concern over casualties among policy-makers	Not decisive	Sensitive	Hypersensitive and decisive	Sensitive
Weapon(s) of choice	Conventional forces	Conventional forces	Precision-guided munitions (PGMs)	PGMs/special Ops forces/ power projection forces

will need to be configurable across the spectrum of conflict to conduct missions such as homeland defense, rapid power projection, conventional operations, special operations, and constabulary missions. The American dominance in areas such as precision strike, global projection, and command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C⁴I) will work across all such contingencies to provide unique advantages.

Furthermore, American military strategy must avoid the belief that high technology “silver bullets” will always carry the day. This is particularly the case with regard to air power and precision-guided munitions. As Eliot Cohen has put it, “[a]ir power is an unusually seductive form of military strength, in part because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment.”¹³ While air power is a fearsome and efficient weapon of tactical and operational effect, it works best in concert with ground forces in combined arms operations. The air campaigns in Kosovo and Afghanistan have proven that air power is most effective when ground forces engage and bring into the open enemy formations, or when spotters use laser designation and identification devices to bring effective and accurate firepower to bear.

Geography remains a, if not *the*, key shaper in the realm of American military strategy. Overcoming what has been termed as “the tyranny of distance” has made air power and cruise missiles such attractive implements of military power. Today B-2 Stealth Bombers can take-off from their base in Missouri and strike at any target globally. Similarly, the global presence of the U.S. Navy places ship-launched cruise missiles or attack aircraft within close proximity to virtually every actual or potential hot spot. Aside from those advantages, however, the U.S. military in the twenty-first century is the only military force able to project land power to every corner of the world. Long-range transport aircraft, fast moving cargo ships, and maritime and land-based prepositioned stocks allow for the rapid deployment of at least a small American military presence across the world.

Global power projection without doubt is America’s martial core competency. With this in mind then, the United States’ military strategy should be one that does not subtract resources from this source of strength. While nations such as Great Britain or France can project small numbers of forces to certain regions of the world, the vast majority of states in the international system maintain militaries with either a regional or intrastate focus. This in no way suggests that other nations maintain vastly inferior military forces, simply that when possible a clear division of labor for different types of military operations makes the most strategic sense. The differentiation of roles and missions that various nations stress is all but necessitated by the lack of, or difficulty in, interoperability (particularly in the area of C⁴I) among foreign nations—including even our NATO allies—and U.S. forces.

¹³Eliot A. Cohen, “The Mystique of U.S. Air Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 1994, p. 109.

The inherent role differentiation between the United States and its NATO allies is highlighted by the Kosovo war. While all nineteen NATO members participated in some form, U.S. aircraft delivered more than 80 percent of all ordnance, flew over half of the strike missions, and performed over 70 percent of all support missions.¹⁴ Furthermore, NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson noted that the alliance's European armies struggled to deploy 40,000 troops, a mere 2 percent of their combined total, to Kosovo during the follow-on peacekeeping mission.¹⁵ The only area where true interoperability does not seem hampered is in the area of special operations forces. It is no accident then that of the allied troops fighting and working alongside American troops in Afghanistan, the majority have been commandos from Great Britain, Australia, Canada, and Turkey. Special operations forces seem to have less of a problem in interaction because of their common shared principles of élan and specialized training. Such training and coordination is also built between these forces through programs such as joint combined exchange training (JCET) designed to build working relationships and rapport between U.S. special operators and their foreign counterparts.¹⁶

Achieving the tenets of decisive action (tactical/operational victory and shaping the strategic environment) will therefore require role diversification and a workable division of labor with actual or would-be allies. The U.S. military should continue to do a majority of the heavy lifting in areas such as rapid power projection and combat operations while other nations should do the bulk of the work in areas such as peacekeeping. American diplomacy, aid, and limited numbers of constabulary forces should be used in the post-conflict setting to coordinate with allies and to shape the strategic environment in ways conducive to furthering local and regional stability and peace.

Force Structure

As was stated earlier, a key problem with the contemporary American military is that much of its force structure and equipment is a legacy force for fighting a war against the former Soviet Union that never happened, and structurally organized along the lines of the Second World War, if not an earlier era. While advances in information technology have bolstered certain revolutionary advances for the conduct of war, currently American forces are not optimally organized for taking full advantage of such advances—perhaps with the exception of the Marine Corps. Transforming the force structure seems to be a hostage of particular service cultures

¹⁴The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 1999/2000* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 15.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶For an interesting discussion of the JCET program see Dana Priest, "U.S. Military Trains Foreign Troops," *Washington Post*, July 12, 1998.

and their reigning orthodoxies.¹⁷ This however is crucially needed because, as President Bush recently stated, “Our war on terror cannot be used to justify obsolete bases, obsolete programs, or obsolete weapon systems. Every dollar of defense spending must meet a single test: It must help us build the decisive power we will need to win the wars of the future.”¹⁸

Building the force structure for the proposed doctrine of decisive action requires robust American military capabilities on land, at sea, and in the aerospace realm. Forces, and their weapons systems, must be lethal, agile, precise, and, when possible, stealthy. No amount of technological sophistication, however, will do away with the need to “close with and destroy the enemy”—even at close quarters, if necessary. Furthermore, as was already stated, U.S. forces must be configurable for the missions of: homeland defense, power projection, conventional operations, special operations, and constabulary contingencies.

Land forces of the Army, Marine Corps, and special operations forces (SOF) will continue to be indispensable for the conduct of the five missions. At present, however, only the Marines, SOF, and a limited portion of the Army are optimally organized for executing the strategy proposed here. The mainstream army and its Enhanced Readiness Brigade (ERB) elements in the National Guard, in particular, should use advances in information technologies to flatten its command and organizational structures in order to be more rapidly deployable. To this end, Colonel Douglas MacGregor’s ideas on moving toward a brigade or regimental-size organizational structure should be implemented.¹⁹ The old division and corps organizational structures of the “Reforger” Army must be done away with.

Furthermore, units such as the Interim Brigade Combat Teams (IBCTs) that Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki has proposed must move forward rapidly and be expanded.²⁰ Such forces will provide a much-needed middle ground between light infantry units and the formidable, yet exceedingly heavy, mechanized and armor units and can be used across the entire mission spectrum. The problem is that only six of these types of units are in the plans to be stood up and one of these will be a unit of the Pennsylvania National Guard.²¹ And while mechanized and armored forces will continue to be necessary for conducting conventional operations, their

¹⁷ For discussions of the service cultures, see Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), and Thomas E. Ricks, *Making the Corps* (New York: Scribner Book Company, 1997).

¹⁸ George W. Bush, “President Speaks on War Effort to Citadel Cadets.”

¹⁹ Douglas A. MacGregor, *Breaking the Phalanx: A New Design For Land Power in the 21st Century* (Westport, C.T.: Praeger, 1997).

²⁰ These units are designed around versions of wheeled light armored vehicles (LAVs) that provide high-speed maneuver, a modicum of protection, and considerable firepower—twenty-five millimetre chain guns or one hundred and five millimeter cannons on different variants.

²¹ Army Public Affairs, “Army Announces Locations of Next Interim Brigade Combat Teams,” U.S. Army News Release, July 12, 2001 (<http://www.dtic.mil/armylink/news/Jul2001>).

numbers should be cut back and, when possible, they should be stationed overseas to make them available for rapid reaction contingencies. New tactical and operational doctrines will need to be worked out for all of these types of units so that they optimize advantages from information technologies and the smaller organizational structures that will give them disproportional combat power for their respective sizes.

Naval and aerospace forces must also be overhauled. Combined arms operations will require naval and air forces capable of rapid power projection and precision strike. The Navy must move toward procurement of Arsenal ships (semi-submersible vessels containing hundreds of Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles) that can provide precision strikes while also maintaining a reasonable-sized surface and submarine fleet to patrol the crucial sea-lines of communication necessary for global trade. The Air Force for its part must acquire additional strategic lift, long-range bombers, and UAVs that will underpin strategic agility, provide much needed precision strike, and give real-time informational support for U.S. forces that may be operating in areas lacking the necessary logistical facilities in close proximity. The number of short-ranged, and expensive, fighter and fighter-attack aircraft should be reduced in order to acquire the more capable long-range bombers.²² Additional space-based capabilities will also be needed to provide U.S. forces with advanced communications and near real-time information (Table 2).

In the area of procurement, the U.S. military should strive to ensure that communications systems are interoperable across the services and also allow full integration with those used by allies or potential allies. Off-the-shelf technologies or systems should also be procured and used when possible. The Marine Corps recently showed that the procurement process does not have to be unwieldy. The Marines took two months to procure 94 commercially made Mercedes-Benz small trucks and dubbed them Interim Fast Attack Vehicles—under normal Pentagon procedures new vehicles generally takes five years to procure.²³

Above all, internecine feuds among the services must be squashed by firm civilian control. The consolidation of services is not the answer to future defense needs. Each of the services approaches the conduct of warfare with different philosophies and brings divergent core competencies to the table. These core competencies allow for full spectrum options for the employment of armed force and also strengthen civilian control and oversight by creating an entrepreneurial and competitive atmosphere that provides qualitatively better military forces. The only area where consolidation might make sense is in the field of logistics and support, where it could reduce redundant

²²The B-52, B-1, and B-2 bombers that took part in the Kosovo war flew less than 1 percent of the sorties but dropped roughly 50 percent of the bombs and missiles used during the conflict. IISS, *Strategic Survey*, p. 15. See also: James Dao and Eric Schmitt, "New Pentagon Debate Over Stealth Plane," *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 2001.

²³Vernon Loeb, "Marines' Mission Stirs Army Debate," *Washington Post*, Dec. 9, 2001.

Table 2 The Military Force Structure^a

	Current force structure ²⁴	Force structure for decisive action
Army Armored/Mechanized Brigades	28 (20 AD, 8 NG)	23 (13 AD, 10 NG)
Army IBCTs	6 planned (5 AD, 1 NG)	12 (11 AD, 1 NG)
Army Light Infantry Brigades	13 (6 AD, 7NG)	4 (0 AD, 4 NG)
Army Airborne Brigades	4 AD	4 AD
Army Air Assault Brigades	3 AD	6 AD
Navy Aircraft Carriers	12 (11 AD, 1 NR)	8 AD
Navy Arsenal Ships	0	10
Navy Amphibious Ships	42	45
Navy Sealift Force	24	30
Marine Infantry Regiments	11 (8 AD, 3 MCR)	12 (9 AD, 3 MCR)
Air Force Tactical Squadrons	108 (52 AD, 49 ANG, 7 AFR)	80 (40 AD, 34 ANG, 6 AFR)
Air Force Bomber Squadrons	14 (11 AD, 2 ANG, 1 AFR)	25 (18 AD, 5 ANG, 2 AFR)
Air Force Transport Squadrons	74 (28 AD, 27 ANG, 19 AFR)	80 (32 AD, 28 ANG, 20 AFR)

^a AD: Active Duty; NG: National Guard ERBs; MCR: Marine Corps Reserve; ANG: Air National Guard; AFR: Air Force Reserve.

capabilities across the services, allowing them to retain more combat arms forces.

Personnel

A crucial element for implementing the proposed doctrine and strategy of decisive action will be to retain and cultivate the right types of leaders and also soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who are highly trained, skilled, and motivated to carry out this strategy. The services must promote an entrepreneurial and improvisational culture throughout the ranks.

In an age of increasingly “joint” forces, however, developing, maintaining, and retaining the best types of military leaders is sometimes difficult. As the separate service budgets are increasingly determined through processes such as the Joint Requirements Oversight Council (JROC), the area where service parochialism lingers strongest is in their individual personnel policies. Depending on the particular leadership of the services, the type of leaders selected for advancement within the individual services depends on a host of qualifying or disqualifying factors. Such factors may include the amount of time spent in command, the types of command held, other types of assignment held, evaluation reports, the fulfillment

²⁴ Source of figures: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1999–00* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999). These figures exclude many other items of inventory, principally other naval surface combatants and special operations forces.

of civilian and professional military educational requirements, and personality. Much skill and luck are needed for someone to accede to higher levels of responsibility.

Further complicating matters has been what Charles Moskos, America's leading military sociologist, has described as the shifting role of the officer in the military. Moskos posits that over the past fifty years the ideal officer has shifted from the combat leader to the manager or technician to, most recently, the soldier-statesman/scholar.²⁵ In other words, the emerging trend has seen the rise of military officers who are most capable in the political-military realm rather than leaders more comfortable in troop-leading assignments. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, elevating such leaders at the expense of combat leaders will certainly have a denigrating effect on the military's ability to carry out decisive actions.

A case in point is the example of Army Colonel John Scroggins. Colonel Scroggins recently submitted retirement papers after being denied promotion to the rank of Brigadier General for the third time. A twenty-eight years veteran, he was the consummate warrior's warrior. Not only did he hold commands in airborne, Ranger, and Special Forces units, he also holds a Master's degree in English. Apparently his personality or emphasis on spending time with combat troops ended his ascent through the ranks. The actual reasons remain unknown, shrouded in the mysteries of an army promotion board.²⁶ But a military force that denies future promotions and commands to such leaders does so at its own risk. While the face of warfare may be changing, the onslaught of high-technology gadgetry will never replace highly trained and motivated soldiers.

In order to change the way it thinks and fights, the military will also need defense intellectuals within the ranks capable of "thinking outside the box." Such individuals are just as critical as skilled and able warfighters. Unfortunately, though the military services historically have been resistant to innovation in the absence of battlefield defeat or the pressure of strong-willed civilian leaders.²⁷ An obstacle for innovators has been that the cultures and bureaucratic interests of the services make those organizations difficult to change. The specific climates in which the services carry out their operational assignments directly shape both their outlook on war and peace and those tools with which they equip themselves.²⁸ In order for true military innovation to be successful though, there is often a need for young talented officers who can develop usable new military capabilities as long as they are

²⁵ Charles C. Moskos, "Toward a Post-modern Military: The United States as a Paradigm," in Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, and David Segal (eds.), *The Post-modern Military: Armed Forces after the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 14–31.

²⁶ David Wood, "'Col. Grunt,' Beloved of His Troops, Is Three Times Denied a Promotion," *Newhouse News Service*, Nov. 8, 2001 (<http://www.newhouse.com/archive>).

²⁷ Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

²⁸ See, for example, Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

protected and promoted.²⁹ Such officers need to be cultivated in the current era because fresh thinking will be required for future success on the near and distant battlefields awaiting U.S. forces.

Reforming American military culture will be the key to training, cultivating, and retaining the mix of officers and enlisted soldiers necessary for the meeting the demands of the international security environment.³⁰ An entrepreneurial spirit that rewards qualities such as valor, audacity, risk-taking, and innovation should be engrained throughout the ranks. Furthermore, advances in areas such as C⁴I mean that tactical and operational commanders must be given more autonomy and trust in order to carry out their missions. Without such qualities the military risks becoming what Snider, Nagl, and Pfaff term an “obedient military bureaucracy.” Such a bureaucracy lacks autonomy, is devoid of the notion of self-sacrifice, and responds to the directives of civilian leaders in an uncritical manner.³¹ To avoid having such a military, changes will likely be required in laws governing personnel issues.³² To that end the Secretary of Defense and the civilian service secretaries must take measures to increase oversight of the service promotion processes to ensure that the proper mix of warfighters, innovators, and soldier-diplomats are advanced through the system. All of this should be done in a top-down manner that works within the services by selecting the appropriate general and flag-rank officers to drive the process.

One problem facing the services is that few officers or enlisted personnel actually get to ply their warfighting skills in the real world.³³ A key element for preparing American troops at all levels has been the increased reliance on adequate and realistic training. Since the end of the Vietnam War, many analysts have pointed out that training at facilities such as the National Training Center (NTC), the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC), and the Vieques Range have built skill and cohesion.³⁴ These facilities are imperative for testing our leaders’ mettle and evaluating the doctrine used by our forces against an opponent who seldom loses. Leaders and their troops should be encouraged

²⁹ Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 252.

³⁰ For an overview of the topic of military culture see the articles by Don M. Snider, Williamson Murray, and John Hillen in the Winter 1999 issue of *Orbis*.

³¹ Dr. Don M. Snider, Major John A. Nagl, and Major Tony Pfaff, *Army Professionalism, the Military Ethic, and Officership in the Twenty-First Century* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Dec. 1999), p. 26.

³² Title 10 U.S.C., Subtitle A, Part II—Personnel contains the relevant chapters. (<http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/10/stApII.html>).

³³ Eliot A. Cohen, “The Unequal Dialogue,” in Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (eds.), *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 451–52.

³⁴ See for example James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

to approach this type of training in improvisational ways. New and innovative tactics can be discovered and tested when leaders are allowed to depart from doctrine in these relatively safe training environments.

Such training also hones the skill and cohesion necessary for military effectiveness. While many analysts have argued that American technology has ensured battlefield success, a more nuanced approach shows that skill and unit cohesion are often more likely the key determinants. For instance, Stephen Biddle in his analysis of the Battle of the 73 Easting in the Gulf War, showed that the skill of members of Eagle Troop, Second Armored Cavalry Regiment, rather than their advanced M1A1 Abrams Battle Tanks and M3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles, proved decisive in defeating a numerically superior Iraqi Republican Guard brigade.³⁵ Likewise, Nora Kinzer Stewart's analysis of the Falklands War showed that the camaraderie and training of British forces were the keys to defeating a largely conscript Argentine opponent who had geography, and thus logistics, on their side.³⁶ History is replete with battles such as Rourke's Drift, Goose Green, Entebbe, and Mogadishu which have shown that skilled and cohesive units are eminently capable of overcoming numerically superior but qualitatively inferior foes.

In facing the current asymmetric threat of global terrorism the United States must develop the appropriate personnel and imbue them, across all ranks, with the qualities and characteristics as discussed above. Without such men and women in uniform our military will be simply reacting to threats rather than forcing opponents to react to their actions. Attaining such initiative, where possible, will ensure battlefield success and limit the strategic effect of unfortunate outcomes when American forces are caught by unpleasant surprises.

Conclusion

In the new era of protracted conflict the United States military stands at a crossroads. Decisive action as outlined above provides a roadmap for moving forward. Transforming the military in the areas of doctrine, strategy, force structure, and personnel policies will allow the U.S. military to triumph against terrorism when military action is necessary and provide security and defense against other threats to American national security. The political and military leadership now has the opportunity to realistically assess the future of the international environment and potential threats in an era where the

³⁵ Stephen Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us about the Future of Conflict," *International Security*, Fall 1996, pp. 139–79.

³⁶ Nora Kinzer Stewart, *Mates, and Muchachos, Unit Cohesion in the Falklands/Malvinas War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1991).

domestic political environment seems supportive for change in the military establishment. Only through such transformation will the U.S. military be able to avert future disasters or, barring that, rapidly and decisively respond to bring justice to those who commit such atrocities against the nation and its citizens.

