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The Postmodern Military

The Irony of "Strengthening" Defense

The tortuous elevation of George W. Bush to the presidency was the first clearly postmodern presidential election—less because of its debt to surrealism than because of the supreme irony that has pervaded the election's resolution and aftermath. Here was the United States, the world's pre-eminent bastion of democracy, relinquishing the selection of its head of state to a nonelected judiciary. Here too was the

most technologically advanced nation in the world made hostage to electoral hijacking by its own antiquated voting machinery.

In the final analysis, though, it is in the realm of military affairs that irony may have its most profound and lasting impact. For starters, Bush, having parroted the prevailing mythology that there is a revolution in military affairs afoot, has selected for his national-security team a distinctly nonrevolutionary group of traditionalists notable for their establishmentarian conception of military roles. Furthermore, having likewise promised throughout his campaign to renew the trust between the president and the military, Bush has set the stage for succumbing to a parochial military establishment united in its single-minded thirst for more funds and armaments.

Interestingly enough, the ultimate irony of Bush's assumption of office is closely intertwined with the irony of his assumption of command. On the one hand, despite a political environment that seeks visionary leadership, Bush will be forced to enact only the most modest policy measures through a deeply divided Congress. On the other hand, having repeatedly promised to strengthen the military as commander-in-chief, he now unknowingly finds himself in a position where truly strengthening the military could mean quite the opposite of what he and the traditionalists around him had in mind. Grasping this difference and then articulating it to others will call for unusual vision and courage. If Bush steps up to the challenge, he will do himself—and the United States—an invaluable service.

Myth of Military Revolution

During the campaign, Bush declared that, if elected, he would order immediate reviews of both US overseas deployments and military-force structure, strategy, and procurement. If he follows through on the promise to conduct such reviews, he and his advisers must make two counterintuitive moves. First, they must jettison the empty "revolution in military affairs" rhetoric until they are willing and able to invest it with legitimate meaning. A true revolution, capable of providing the United States with a permanent military advantage, would entail perhaps more than any presidential administration would be willing to undertake. A true transformational upheaval could entail the elimination of the Marines, tanks, or submarines; the dismissal of at least one leg of the nuclear triad that is comprised of sea-launched ballistic missiles, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and manned bombers; or the wholesale replacement of lethal by nonlethal weaponry. Needless to say, no such dramatic measures have captured the imaginations of those who claim expertise in military matters.

So there is no revolution. Rather, we are on the cusp of a grand evolution from a prolonged historical period of "Hot Wars," in which the actual use of military force was the central element of statecraft; to a highly compressed period of Cold War, in which the nonuse of the

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military beyond threat-making was statecraft's defining element; to the current period of "New War," in which nonmilitary instruments of national power and nontraditional uses of the military predominate in statecraft. The hope is that society will eventually evolve to a state of "No War," in which enduring universal peace (what Immanuel Kant called "perpetual peace") is the prevailing condition, and militaries become obsolete.

Self-styled realists, including the Bush advisors, continue to dominate the discourse of national-security affairs. They would deny that a state of "No War" could ever reasonably exist; thus it is futile to pursue it. Yet they would be hard-pressed to identify any other preferred state of affairs toward which our strategic efforts ought to be directed. If the end could really be a state of "No War," then even realists will have to concede that the necessary precondition for such an end-state is demilitarization, which must be preceded by denuclearization and delethalization. The question becomes whether we continue business as usual and entrust our fate to the invisible hand of social evolution, or whether the United States as the apparent lone global superpower bears an obligation to lead the way in accelerating the pace of this evolution.

Strategic Effectiveness

The Bush team must recognize the need for not merely military effectiveness but also strategic effectiveness—the ability to enhance the likelihood of achieving larger strategic aims. A militarily effective force like the United States' is highly lethal and indiscriminate; it may be strategically dysfunctional because it cannot—or will not—be used when necessary, or, when used, wreaks destruction out of proportion to the stakes at hand.

Judging the military in terms of strategic effectiveness rather than sheer power would force not just the Bush team but also the national-security community as a whole to confront the question that is never asked: what is the fundamental purpose of the military? Is it, as according to conventional wisdom, to prepare for and wage war? Or is it to prevent war, to secure and preserve peace? The classical assumption has been that if we want peace, we must prepare for war. Such faulty logic denies that preparing for war cannot help but, instead, only feeds an eternal spiral of militarization. But perhaps we can posit a different logic, that the military's purpose is to prevent war or to secure and preserve peace. Perhaps we can shape rather than passively react to the governing environment. If we want peace then perhaps we must pursue peace by calling for a qualitatively

A Patriot missile roars off the launch pad during Exercise Roving Sands 1997.

Photo Courtesy US Department of Defense

different military force capable of actually facilitating demilitarization.

Managing Perceptions

There are two ways to judge the military's strategic effectiveness. The first way is goal attainment—the extent to which the military does, in fact, contribute to the state's larger strategic aims. The second is the extent to which the military contributes to the effective management of perceptions. The latter is especially important. Those who would disparage the notion of creating and projecting images; of manipulating symbols; of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing reality, would do well to acknowledge how ingrained the practice of perceptions management already is in our public policy. Were it otherwise, the United States would have a Department of War, as it was once known, or a Department of Peace, rather than a Department of Defense; or the United States would speak more candidly of its international posture of "interventionism" rather than using the euphemism "engagement."

The importance of managing such perceptions lies in the fact that nations judge potential adversaries in terms of political and military responsiveness, reliability, consistency, and, most of all, unity: unity of purpose, unity of effort, and unity of action. In this media age, unity, or the perception of unity, will be a key determinant of international standing in the global pecking order. Those who can act as one—who demonstrate unifying social cohesion and national will—will have a decided advantage over those who are preoccupied and immobilized by balkanization from within.

An image of national will is essential because unity of purpose is so fundamental for effectively wielding power in the international arena. During the Cold War, when national power was defined almost exclusively by its military component, the United States sought to build its capabilities for purposes of tacit threat-making so as to deter any serious military conflict. The strength and credibility yielded a balance of power insofar as the perceptions of each nation's military capability deterred the threatening maneuvers by others. Today, confronted by foes that are more and more unlike the United States and by situations that are inherently ambiguous in their origins and consequences, bolstering national will is the key to diplomatic success. For a nation that has adopted diversity and chosen pluralism as a way of social and political life, such will comes at a premium. In contrast to the practiced military inaction of the Cold War, there is now an imperative for taking decisive military action abroad on a more regular basis. Undertaking and sustaining such action depend on the convergence of national will and the projection of that unity and determination to potential adversaries.

At another level, the perceptual dimension of strategic effectiveness reflects the fact that the military not only possesses capabilities and performs functions but also projects a certain image of itself. Could we alter such imagery if we wanted to, and should we want to if we could? The answer is "yes" on both counts. It is time to disabuse ourselves of the shibboleth that the best, if not the only, path to peace is through the practice of war. If peace is what we seek as an ultimate strategic end, and if demilitarization is the necessary precondition for such peace, it seems only logical that reorienting the behavior and uses of the military, and thus transforming its image, is the only way to make progress in that direction.

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Supporting Strategic Aims

The most telling basis for judging the military's strategic effectiveness is the extent to which military operations and practices contribute to the attainment of larger strategic aims. The first of these grand strategic aims is the promotion and protection of a comprehensive conception of human well-being that embodies all the precepts enumerated in the preamble to the US Constitution. Thus, military spending, force structure, doctrine, technology,

manpower, training, and operational employment must not only provide for the common defense but also contribute to a more perfect union. When the military diverts mammoth resources from other critical national needs; when its obsessive secrecy provides a rationale for injustice and unaccountability; when its actions abroad undermine US credibility, its security is diminished rather than strengthened.

The second overarching aim that should guide the United States strategically is the prevention of crisis. A crisis occurs when the traditional strategy has failed. Once a crisis begins, resources, time, energy, and personnel must be diverted from their intended purposes, and deliberative decision-making must be cast aside, just to defuse the situation. Moreover, the magnifying and time-compressing effects of contemporary media have so lowered the threshold of what counts as a crisis that situations previously considered more or less routine or insignificant now are inflated to crisis proportions.

A military that reinforces the war-making stereotype of militaries everywhere, that provokes by its presence rather than reassures, that is too blunt and lethal an instrument of statecraft to be used for anything other than reacting destructively to "crisis" situations, only reinforces the prospect of this strategically debilitating state of affairs. The antidote would be a reoriented, reconfigured military capable of being employed in a less provocative, more discriminating, and even constructive manner to treat and remove the root causes of unrest, violence, and instability before they perpetuate a crisis.

The third strategic aim, unique to democracy, is the preservation of civil society—acting in a manner that strengthens, or at least does not weaken, the interlocking web of public and private institutions that imbues democracy with meaning and enables society to function with civility. This calls for a military that is demographically, experientially, and ethically representative of society, and that reinforces public trust and confidence in government by being not only operationally competent but also socially responsible.

During the Cold War, the military, along with the other institutions that constitute the national-security establishment, adopted practices that may well have undermined civil society. Today, much of the intellectual residue of the Cold War remains: the ingrained penchant for secrecy, the conviction that pervasive evil must be defeated on its own terms, and the belief that extraordinary ends require and permit extraordinary

Gazing into the future. A US army officer positions his night-vision goggles.

Photo Courtesy US Department of Defense

means. Moreover, although opinion polls suggest that the public holds the military in relatively high esteem compared to other public institutions, there is mounting evidence that the military has become progressively more alienated from society. While incidents of socially irresponsible behavior by armed-services personnel—sexual misconduct, abuses of authority, intolerance, and fraud—have occurred with alarming frequency in recent years, uniformed professionals still regularly express attitudes of moral superiority. Such behaviors and attitudes reveal much that is troubling about the military's self-aggrandizing sense of its mission and itself.

Four Strategic Imperatives

The above strategic aims suggest four imperatives that should guide the structure and use of a strategically effective military. First, if the United States is to achieve lasting peace and security, it must have the capability to target, deal effectively with, and ultimately eliminate the underlying causes of unrest, violence, and instability abroad. To have the capability only to react after the fact, and then to do so only when the symptoms of the moment have become sufficiently urgent and threatening, is to heighten the probability of crisis misjudgment and failure. The dilemma, of course, is that treating causes—intolerance, injustice, repression, deprivation, environmental degradation—means dealing with conditions before they are deemed threatening, when they fall within the accepted sovereign purview of another country, or when they thereby seem to demand a strictly nonmilitary response.

Second, therefore, the United States must institutionalize the capacity to undertake anticipatory response—to make preventive or pre-emptive action an accepted norm, to make it possible and even desirable to act before crises erupt, and to do so in ways that prompt a fundamental rethinking of conceptional conceptions of sovereignty and intervention. At present, the US military is a singularly reactive crisis instrument, structured so that its early, preventive use can only be seen as premature, provocative, and thus inappropriate.

Third, the United States must be capable of tailoring its responses to the situations at hand, rather than futilely attempting to make situations conform to its capabilities. The established approach of fielding functionally oriented general-purpose forces with standardized organizational structures, personnel, and training may seem to suit the military relatively well for traditional conventional operations, like the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but it leaves us quite ill-suited for the myriad other conflicts that will arise with increasing frequency. The failed performance in Vietnam and the halting responses to innumerable situations since—most recently in the Balkans—attest to the results. Every time the United States fails to act—or fails while acting—it seriously diminishes US credibility and the perception of our effectiveness.

Finally, even as the United States must tailor its military response to situational peculiarities, so too must it seek greater organizational, operational, procedural, and even intellectual integration of the military and the national-security establishment as a whole. No longer can the country countenance expensive rivalry among the individual armed services, even if such competition arguably enhances civilian control of the military; no longer can the United States justify maintaining redundant capabilities in the belief that such diversity somehow multiplies uncertainty for a unitary adversary.

A Transformed Military

A fundamentally transformed military is needed, one whose primary purpose is peacekeeping, nation-building, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response, not war-making. Yes, these are all missions the military already performs to varying degrees, but the focus still remains on preparation for war.

National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice, a strong influence in the Bush administration's foreign policy, declares that "the president must remember that the military is a special instrument. It is lethal, and it is meant to be. It is not a civilian police force. It is not a political referee. And it is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society."

These, regrettably, are not voices of strategic vision. These are the voices of the Cold War, of a military-industrial complex that perversely keeps the United States wedded to big wars that demand and feed off compulsive technological advances. These are voices that, absent an extraordinary change of faith, virtually guarantee a perpetuation of a US military as it stands now, rather than the introduction of a military needed for the conditions of the 21st century.

The military we have is designed to fight wars. Any other mission is considered secondary. Its characteristics are those that arguably have served it well in the past and are expected to continue doing so when history repeats itself.

The military the United States needs is one based on the supposition that the future need not be a mere repetition of the past. A transformed military designed primarily for peacekeeping, nation-building, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response would be one with characteristics almost the opposite of the military at present: smaller, less expensive, much lighter, less lethal, human-centered, multilaterally oriented, and regionally tailored. Ground forces would take clear precedence over air and naval forces; support personnel would predominate over combat arms; and erstwhile combat functions would give way to policing, conflict mediation, and advisory-assistance functions.

Such a military would presumably require a different constellation of skills—and thus a different demographic profile, possibly even a different caliber of personnel—than the current military possesses: more linguists and regional specialists, higher levels of education, greater levels of maturity and experience, perhaps a complete reconfiguration by gender, ethnicity, and age. This new military would also seem to call for different organizational arrangements, incentive systems, and command approaches: less hierarchy, wider spans of control, and compressed rank; less emphasis on authoritarian command; more emphasis on intellectual leadership, collegiality, and democratic decision-making; less emphasis on coercive discipline and obedience, more on self-discipline, competence, and socially responsible professionalism.

In transforming the military, there would be an accompanying need for major organizational reform—not only to reflect the changing orientation and priorities of the military, but also to engender the thinking necessary to legitimize and sustain such a transformation. For example, the United States should eliminate the mammoth civilian secretariats. We should also replace the existing Joint Chiefs of Staff, composed of the chiefs of the individual services, with a new Council of Military Commanders, composed of the commanders of the regional operational field commands around the world (e.g., the US-European Command, the US-Pacific Command). To establish a new level of civilian and diplomatic supremacy, the United States should create regional super-ambassadors in each of the world's major regions. And to give a heightened degree of permanency to its multilateral relationships and to help ensure that the United States does not become the world's policeman, it should embark on a serious effort to establish permanent collective-security regimes in each region.

Hope for Things to Come

These proposals are truly revolutionary and, thus, truly infeasible in the near term. No ordinary practicing politician would entertain ideas that offer so little prospect of actual implementation. Even with acute political and intellectual skills, combined with an environment of relative peace and prosperity, former US President Bill Clinton failed to deliver a strategic vision worthy of the times.

If the United States is to achieve lasting peace and security, it must have the capability to target, deal effectively with, and ultimately eliminate the underlying causes of unrest, violence, and instability abroad.

The times call for a bona fide revolution in military and strategic terms. But, perhaps the new political climate will prove to be riper for change. Bush, who has quite the opposite intellectual reputation of his predecessor and who has an ideologically conferred measure of credibility with the military that Clinton clearly lacked, is in a prime position to enact significant change. What should energize him and his national-security advisor is the recognition that his chances for re-election will only be enhanced if he shows himself capable of visionary proposals—in this case, for the revolutionary transformation of a military whose true relevance and value will be judged in terms of its strategic effectiveness. The President's willingness to take the road less traveled, to initiate an as-yet-dormant national dialogue on the United States' strategic future, can only establish his place in history. In so doing, he can establish the United States' role in the world for the 21st century. ■