



Two Decades Late

By Frederick W. Kagan

In their new book, Ground Truth: The Future of U.S. Land Power, AEI's Thomas Donnelly and Frederick W. Kagan argue that if the United States is to maintain its status as the sole superpower, American land power must be restructured to confront unprecedented challenges. Kagan expands on the subject in this article by discussing a military system that was geared to fight a single enemy—the Soviet Union—with relatively even balances between services and theaters of operations. The 1986 military reorganization made some improvements, he says, but the military is still poorly structured for the kind of wars we are likely to face.

More than five years after the war on terror began, the strains it has placed on the U.S. military are beginning to show. Some observers have noticed increasing signs of tension between the Pentagon and our commanders in the field. Interservice rivalries have started to kick up again as the U.S. Marines talk about getting back to their boats; the U.S. Navy talks about recapitalizing parts of its fleet; and the U.S. Air Force takes up the case of the F-22, the Joint Strike Fighter, and so on, with reference to more-or-less distant threats.

At one level, these problems seem to have a common cause: the persistent notion that the current large-scale deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan will be short-lived, and we need to be ready for what comes next. In reality, that notion is not the cause of these strains but a symptom of problems that go back much farther. Military policymakers view the current level of deployment as an aberration. They do this because they have to—because the military system they are part of is not designed to support such a level in the long term. Recognizing this fact means recognizing the unpalatable truth that the old ways will not work in the twenty-first century. The world has changed,

and the threats we face have changed, and that means it is time for a fundamental reorganization of our national security apparatus.

It would not be the first time the military has undergone sweeping change. The current U.S. national security organization was designed during the Cold War to face the threats of that struggle. The National Security Act of 1947 created the U.S. Air Force and what became the Defense Department and reshaped the intelligence agencies. The structure was tweaked occasionally but in very minor ways until the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which made important changes (although nowhere near as fundamental as those made by the National Security Act). The U.S. military has remained virtually unchanged in its basic structure and function since then.

In the 1980s, the enemy was the Soviet Union. Although China was a potential foe, war with the People's Republic seemed unlikely, and an alliance between the USSR and the PRC even more unlikely. The significance of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was submerged by the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan that same year, as well as by the subsequent Iran-Iraq War. The Reagan administration, like most of its predecessors, viewed troubles in the third world primarily

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within the context of Soviet expansionism rather than as an expression of homegrown tensions.

Every aspect of our peacetime armed forces—and our national security structure—was crafted specifically to meet the Soviet challenge, and in the mid-1980s that challenge seemed daunting. Massive Soviet and Warsaw Pact military forces were stationed in Central Europe. The Soviet fleet had been steadily expanding for years in every theater, including the Pacific. Soviet bombers and attack submarines threatened to cut off NATO's sea lines of communication; Soviet armies were ready to invade the Middle East, defend against China, and threaten Japan. And finally, there was the dramatic expansion of the Soviet nuclear arsenal in the 1970s.

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The Soviet threat was enormous, and meeting it required mobilization of the full military resources of the NATO countries and their allies. We had to face the possibility of overwhelming war in every dimension of every theater at the same time. Any such war, it was expected, would be short and decisive (“apocalyptic” might be a more appropriate term). This assumption came from a number of factors.

In 1973, the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War consumed in a week as many tanks as NATO had in Europe. American military leaders watching that conflict were stunned by the speed and lethality of modern armored warfare. The Soviets had already concluded (for a variety of reasons) that if a European war broke out, their best chance of success lay in speed. They intended to get from the inter-German border to the English Channel in thirty days. NATO was aware of their intentions.

Political considerations required defending against such a threat at the border. Even though it is virtually impossible to stop an armored invasion at its source, the Germans were understandably reluctant to see their country as expendable, so they insisted that NATO be capable of doing just that, and the United States worked hard to meet this expectation. U.S. military doctrine and organization were geared to fighting hard from the outset, reinforcing immediately, and winning quickly. The assumption

was that if rapid victory did not come, the entire nation would mobilize behind the shield of the volunteer armed forces and would overwhelm the Soviets, as it had overwhelmed the Nazis and the imperial Japanese.

From the military's standpoint, there was no real need to think about how the war would end or what to do after it did. Everyone assumed that any large-scale war would lead to a full-blown nuclear exchange, and there did not seem to be much point in postwar planning for such a scenario. If the war somehow stopped short of the apocalypse, then it could pretty much only be a return to the status quo, with neither side holding the other's territory, so there was no need to plan for an occupation either.

Game, Set, and Match

Everything else the U.S. military did during the Cold War was subordinate to the requirement to be ready for the big one. Since, happily, we never did fight the big one, it turns out that all of those “distractions”—Korea, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Cuba, El Salvador, Panama, and so on—actually were the real thing as far as fighting went. But we never configured our military specifically to undertake them because they remained less important, even collectively, than the need to be ready to stop the Soviets in the “central front” (Europe), the Pacific, and the Middle East.

Boiling all this down, the basic assumptions shaping the Cold War military were that all services were equally important, all theaters would be under tremendous strain, speed of response in every dimension would be critical, and the war would be short—or, if it was long, then it would look like World War II. As a result, we built a military that divided defense-budget dollars roughly evenly among the services; decentralized control of the operational theaters to their commanders, who reported only to the secretary of defense (thereby pulling the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff out of the chain of command); and made the Pentagon responsible for rushing every available force to the fighting theaters as quickly as possible and mobilizing the nation behind them.

Basically, the purpose of the entire military establishment—especially as redesigned in 1986—was not to fight, but to be ready to fight. When speed of reaction and winning the first battle in every theater are key, then the day-to-day readiness of every aspect of the force is key. Anything that detracts from that readiness—like the smaller

wars that we actually engaged in regularly—is therefore bad. The structure that embodied these principles was superbly designed to meet the challenges it faced, but it is terribly designed for the world of today.

No single enemy or collection of enemies has replaced the Soviet Union's vast and omnipresent military threat. After a period of confusion in the 1990s, the U.S. military has gradually recognized that it is going to have to spend a lot of time actually conducting military operations—everything from high-end mechanized warfare to peacekeeping and disaster relief. Whether we are talking about the global war on terror or a “long war” or a “protracted conflict,” the critical issue is that the military sees that “rapid decisive operations” are not the key to victory in the current era and that we can “win the first battle”—the main aim of the 1980s military—but lose the war.

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The Cold War force was designed on a principle of balance—among services and between theaters. Today's world offers nothing like that situation. One combatant command—Central Command (CENTCOM)—is responsible for two ongoing major counterinsurgency operations (Iraq and Afghanistan), one significant counterterrorism operation (the Horn of Africa), one major nonproliferation challenge (Iran), and one major regional collapse scenario (Pakistan). No other combatant command faces anything like that burden.

For reasons of NATO politics more than military sense, European Command (EUROCOM) has nominal responsibility for most of the fighting in Afghanistan, but the burden for fighting that war on the ground does not fall heavily on the supreme allied commander's shoulders. Pacific Command faces many potential threats—the Koreans, China, and terrorists in Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as counterpiracy operations—but its main concern is the traditional Cold War mission of

being prepared for possible conflicts, rather than fighting day to day. Southern Command is engaged in a variety of missions, such as directing counternarcotics efforts throughout Latin America and dealing with Venezuela's blowhard leader, Hugo Chávez. But again, the strains it faces are not of the same magnitude as those CENTCOM faces. It remains to be seen how the new Africa Command (AFRICOM) will shake out. There is certainly enough on that continent to pose a serious challenge to any new commander, but unless the United States becomes much more actively involved in ongoing conflicts in Africa, AFRICOM, too, is unlikely to be overwhelmed.

Who Is in Charge Here?

Does it really make sense to have one commander overseeing almost all the major military activities in the most vital theater while the others remain relatively unengaged? Possibly, depending on what role one thinks the combatant commander should have. But the structure was not designed for such an eventuality, and the strains are already showing. For instance, who actually runs Iraq and Afghanistan? In principle, the CENTCOM commander—currently acting commander Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey, though General David Petraeus, currently commander of Multi-National Force—Iraq, has been nominated to replace him—should run both. In practice, he runs neither. General David McKiernan, commander of the International Security Assistance Force, will own allied forces in Afghanistan when he replaces General Dan McNeill, but he reports via a German general to America's EUROCOM commander, General Bantz Craddock, because Afghanistan is a NATO mission. Petraeus, on the other hand, is still nominally Dempsey's subordinate but in practice has been reporting directly to the president since taking his current post. Why? Because Bush, like all his predecessors, wants the unvarnished truth from the man who is on the ground fighting a major war. Petraeus's predecessor, General George Casey, also reported directly to the president. So what is CENTCOM's role? It is hard to say. It is clear, though, that the situation in CENTCOM today is nothing like what the authors of the Goldwater-Nichols reform imagined. The nature of current conflicts is clearly straining the command structure in ways it was never meant to withstand.

Another unanticipated strain has emerged between the war fighters and the force providers. In the 1980s context, this strain was minimal; both groups spent most

of their time preparing for war. In a short war, it would not have mattered either: the military surged a very large force to Kuwait in 1990, but no serious tensions developed because the war was brief and the force was rapidly withdrawn. But the large and protracted deployment of U.S. forces into combat in the CENTCOM theater was never foreseen by the designers of the Cold War military.

Wars wear out people and equipment fast. Both must be replaced. But replacing them costs money and organizational effort that distracts from preparing for future conflict. War also disrupts peacetime training routines, to the detriment of preparedness for contingencies. The U.S. Marines are concerned that too many of their people have not been trained for their supposed primary mission of forced-entry operations. The U.S. Army is worried that many of its tankers have never qualified a tank and many of its brigade commanders have never practiced maneuvering their brigades except in the context of counterinsurgency. Strains on personnel also lead to much higher levels of attrition, especially among officers and senior noncommissioned officers. Good people are leaving, and it takes time to make a brigade commander or a command sergeant major—a good couple of decades in most cases.

Many of these problems could be alleviated by reducing force levels in the active theaters, but the war fighters naturally want more forces. Who decides how to set priorities between fighting current wars and preparing for future ones? Right now, the answer is the secretary of defense and the president, both civilians. Under Goldwater-Nichols, there is no uniformed officer in the Pentagon whose job it is to win the wars we are fighting.

By statute, the job of the Joint Chiefs is to support current conflicts (without getting involved operationally) and to prepare for future ones, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs is the senior military adviser to the president. None of them, however, have the statutory responsibility to win ongoing wars. That job is reserved for the combatant commanders and their subordinates. In the Cold War, this division of labor was not a problem—no one was going to be worrying about future conflicts when the Red Army rolled across the inter-German border. Now it creates a constant tension that requires intervention by the two most senior civilians in the chain of command. To make matters worse, only the force providers have a presence at the center of power, while the war fighters are scattered around the globe.

Hands Off My Pie

The primary purpose of the Goldwater-Nichols legislation was to improve interservice cooperation. The famous incident during the invasion of Grenada in which an officer in one service reportedly had to use a calling card and a public phone to call for fire support from another was an example of this problem. The legislation has tremendously improved interservice cooperation in many ways, including the creation of the combatant commanders, who have responsibility for all U.S. forces from every service in their areas.

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The approach of dividing the defense pie evenly among the services has yielded invaluable benefits. Investments in precision air power (in the U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marines) have been tremendously important to our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as the ability to put large or small ordnance exactly on a designated target at very short notice has transformed the “kinetic” (combat) part of counterinsurgency operations. And the strains on the U.S. Air Force and Navy to provide this support in Iraq and Afghanistan are manageable.

But the strains on the U.S. Army and Marines created by keeping more than 180,000 pairs of boots on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan for years are orders of magnitude greater. The F-15s and Nimitz-class carriers designed to defeat advanced Soviet systems are perfectly useful against insurgents in headbands and sneakers waving AK-47s (although the F-15s and other aircraft are getting old and wearing out and will need to be replaced sooner rather than later). But Humvees and trucks that were never designed for combat zones are dangerously inadequate in the face of advanced improvised explosive devices. The current conflicts are bearing disproportionately on the ground forces, something for which today's military structure was not designed.

The result has been pulling and tugging between the services in ways that are harmful to all. Both the administration and Congress, under both Democratic and Republican leadership, have resisted any dramatic

increase in the baseline defense budget. The U.S. Air Force and Navy saw budgetary trade-offs at their expense in the first years of the current conflict and largely accepted them. Now they are beginning to push back. The current military organization thus not only pits the services against one another—a perennial fact of life—but effectively, and unavoidably, pits some services against the fighters who are currently in the field.

Still another unforeseen strain on the force is the tension between active duty and reserves (including the National Guard) in the ground forces, especially in the U.S. Army. In the 1970s, the pressure to build an all-volunteer military, combined with the need to reduce defense expenditures following the Vietnam War and the simultaneous growth of the Soviet threat, led the U.S. Army to make an important trade-off. It placed many essential but noncombat functions in reserve units in order to keep the maximum possible combat power in the active force. The problem with this approach became apparent in the 1990s, when even the small but protracted deployment of American forces in Bosnia and then Kosovo strained critical support units in the active army and required the mobilization of reservists. To be clear, the deployment of something like 30,000 troops out of an army of 495,000 required reserve mobilizations. That should have awakened some people, but in the “era of constrained defense resources” that was the 1990s, waking up was not an option. The deployment of 180,000 soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan has naturally made the “strain” of the 1990s look relaxed.

The decision to shift functions to National Guard support units affected those units, but the large-scale deployments after 2003 affected even the Guard’s combat units. The current demand for troops has made it necessary to employ National Guard units in extended tours. The National Guard has a long and distinguished lineage, but it has never been used this way before. Lyndon Johnson found it easier to rely on conscription than to commit Guard combat brigades to Vietnam. During Desert Storm, acrimony arose when senior U.S. Army leaders refused to deploy Guard units to the desert on the grounds that they were not combat-ready, and some Guard leaders felt they had been slighted. By the end of the 1990s, Guard units were in the Balkans, and they have kept a sustained presence there, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq ever since.

The problem is that the Guard was not meant to be mobilized and deployed abroad on repeated tours in extended wars. It was meant to be the nation’s strategic reserve—the force that was committed *in extremis* when

a mission exceeded the capability of the active force and before (or in place of) national mobilization. The heavy use of Guard and reserve units in prolonged tours has led some to complain that the nation has broken its compact with those units—that they are being treated like active units when they never signed up to be. This is another legacy of the Cold War. As we have seen, prolonged conflicts were not part of that era’s doctrine.

It is worth noting, finally, that signs of strain have begun to develop even between the U.S. Army and Marines. Since April 2007, U.S. Army units have been deployed to Iraq for fifteen-month tours, while U.S. Marine units deploy for only seven months. The reason is that the Marine Corps wants to keep its troop deployments aligned with ship rotations, and those occur semi-annually. The result is that soldiers spend more than twice as long on the ground at a stretch. Recent comments by Marine Corps commandant James Conway that the Marines would prefer to move out of Iraq entirely and focus on Afghanistan generated additional controversy.

Officers versus Officers

The most subtle and heart-wrenching strains on the military are those developing within the officer corps itself. To the outside (and even to some on the inside) these strains appear to be the result of two rival cliques: a George Casey/John Abizaid group that defends the approach those commanders took in the Iraq War and a David Petraeus/Raymond Odierno group that embraces the “surge” strategy of 2007. There is some truth to this appearance. Senior commanders often inspire enthusiasts and protégés among subordinates and jealousies among equals. The controversy surrounding the January 2007 strategy shift has added to this phenomenon, which would not be remarkable in itself.

But there is more to it than that. Officers who command units in combat face a unique kind of stress. They worry, as anyone would, about the dangers they face, but they worry much more about the dangers their subordinates face. Commanders feel tremendous responsibility to the soldiers they lead, and they take the injuries and deaths of those soldiers very hard indeed. No army has ever had soldiers of such high quality, all volunteers. And of all the losses a commander has to watch his soldiers suffer, none is more painful than a casualty that was avoidable. Commanders understand that people are injured and die in war, even those entrusted to them. But they normally find intolerable

the notion that their soldiers have died because of their mistakes.

From 2004 through 2006, but especially toward the end of that period, there was a general sense that we were not winning in Iraq. The fault, if any, was not that of the soldiers, who fought skillfully, professionally, and bravely. Nor was it that of their midlevel commanders, who led their units well, followed the orders they were given, made only the normal and expectable number of mistakes, and learned from them relatively quickly. Even so, the experience of losing soldiers in what seemed to be a losing cause led some to feel guilty, as though they themselves were to blame. Others simply became bitter that their superiors, either civilian or military, had sent their soldiers to die on a fool's errand. Even commanders who managed to achieve local or regional successes generally emerged frustrated that headquarters seemed unwilling or unable to support and capitalize on their gains.

The tide began to turn in 2007. The start of large-scale Corps offensives in June, together with the rise of tribal movements against al Qaeda, wrong-footed the terrorists and allowed U.S. forces to oversee dramatic and unexpected improvements in security. Many commanders started to feel not only that they were succeeding, but that they were part of an effort that was succeeding overall. Their comrades who left before the turnaround have responded variously, but some have clearly reacted with bitterness, at first denying the possibility of success and then falling into quiet hostility. The first units to experience this sense of success are just now returning home. It remains to be seen how they will interact with their fellows.

Today, Iraq gets all the headlines, but the problems the U.S. military faces are bigger than any single conflict. If U.S. troops left Iraq tomorrow, the military would still be wrongly structured for any kind of war it is likely to face. The fault lines in that structure would still generate inappropriate and dangerous tensions; success would still require superhuman efforts on the part of individual senior leaders to transcend their legally defined roles and think only about the welfare of the nation as a whole. Some would do so; most would not. The system would continue to creak and groan and tear under the pressure of unbalanced strains it was never designed to bear.

Iraq is a symptom of this disease, not the cause. Similar tensions occurred over Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, each with different people in the key positions. This is not a problem of personality dysfunction, and it is not a problem of ideology, although both have played important roles in recent failures. It is a problem of structure; of organization; and, more fundamental, of the conception of what kinds of war we are likely to have to fight and how we will fight them.

Of all the scary war scenarios facing the United States over the coming decades, the one for which our military is currently structured—simultaneous attacks on all fronts, in all dimensions, by a unitary global enemy—is the least likely. A grinding, prolonged, land-forces-based struggle within one regional command, or possibly two, is the most likely. Debate over the wisdom of the Iraq war and our current approach to it has obscured this reality for too long. Two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, it is time to adjust our military for the post-Cold War world.