

GATES' WEST POINT SPEECH: RETURNING TO RUMSFELD'S VISION OF FUTURE WARFARE?

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ABSTRACT

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During the recent decade, the US Army primarily operated in the counter-insurgency environment following relatively short conventional combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the current number of failed states in the world and the likelihood of more, military analysts predict an increase in the potential of conducting more military stability operations versus conventional military operations. The Secretary of Defense recently commented on the lack of potential need or desire to commit significant conventional forces into a fight in the near future. Many experts would agree that a professional military force can only train and equip to be fully effective in one environment, either conventional or stability operations, but not both. Given current Army doctrine and the CSA's directive to be prepared to execute full spectrum operations, what is the correct structural guidance for the army to embark on in preparing for future national defense requirements?

GATES' WEST POINT SPEECH: RETURNING TO RUMSFELD'S VISION OF FUTURE WARFARE?

Introduction: Crossroads are Linear Danger Areas

The United States Army is once again at a critical point in its history. It finds itself embroiled in two protracted ground campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. It anxiously awaits unfolding developments in many other parts of the Middle East and Africa. To modernize and plan for future conflicts, it continues to transform from a Division and Corps-based structure into a modular brigade-based design. All this change is occurring while the Army is undergoing a significant transition in leadership and increased fiscal scrutiny from a Congress under extreme pressure from voters to control federal budget deficits.

The outgoing Army Chief of Staff, General George Casey, championed the Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) model as the solution to the Army's deployment challenges. General Casey focused future planning on the Army's ability to conduct full spectrum operations (FSO), encompassing operations from high-intensity conventional combat operations to stability operations such as counterinsurgency, peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian relief. This shift reflects reality. More and more, since the end of the Cold War, the Army has been employed in operations beyond traditional combat roles. This dramatic shift is even reflected in new Army doctrine like Field Manual (FM) 3-07 "Stability Operations" (SO), FM 3-28 "Civil Support Operations" (CS), and FM 3-24 "Counterinsurgency" (COIN).

In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, General Casey defined the requirement to further refine how FSO is characterized from stable peace to general war.¹ This includes operations at the high end of the spectrum of conflict where the United States fights a near-peer competitor nation armed with significant conventional capabilities, requiring retention of significant traditional war fighting capacity and constant preparation for large-scale conventional ground conflict in response. It

¹ George Casey & John McHugh, Posture of the United States Army, 1st Session, 112th Congress, Committee on Armed Services, United States House of Representatives, March 2, 2011. pg. 24.

also includes lower intensity conflicts against guerrilla, insurgent, and other obstructionist forces that employ a variety of asymmetric tactics to oppose militarily superior foes. Toward this end, for example, the Army's Training and Doctrine Command now has incorporated COIN and SO into all official Army doctrine. Army doctrine anticipates ground forces being called upon in post-conflict and post-disaster environments as well to stabilize weakened nations or areas subjected to natural or man-made disaster.

Regardless of scenario, most land-based operations are manpower intensive, requiring significant numbers of soldiers to lead execution in some cases and support missions led by partner agencies in others. As the Army prepares for multiple missions, it faces critical decisions about funding and resource allocation. For the most part, decisions about changes in structure and advanced programs are made by senior civilian leadership within the Department of Defense (DoD). Their decisions should be based on a vision of future conflict and the employment of force within that vision.

Past remarks by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright suggest that a gradual creep toward nation building as a fundamental Army mission has been coming for some time. During the Clinton Administration, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), GEN Colin Powell stated in his memoirs that he almost had "an aneurysm" when Albright, wanting to use the military for actions outside of vital national interests, challenged him to explain "what is the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it."²

While most military interventions have had some component of nation building as part of their overall mission and objectives, the Army has yet to undergo a major restructuring based upon requirements for that mission set. Is it really the Army's mission to provide support to foreign governments? Is that what the writers of the constitution thought of when drafting that the military provide for the common

² Michael Dobbs, With Albright, Clinton Accepts New US Role, Washington Post, December 8, 1996, Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/govt/admin/stories/albright120896.htm>, Accessed: 27 April, 2011.

defense? Indeed, much of this discussion centers on what the United States requires of its military to meet the basic demands of “providing for the common defense.” What this paper intends to examine is current senior civilian guidance on future force structure and offer some countervailing points of view on future conflicts and their ground force demands. In short, I conclude that senior leader guidance does not match the Army’s current direction nor does it comport well with the requirement to sustain a sizeable land force. What the United States needs is a land component large enough for the nation to continue to pursue its interest in an ever increasingly complex world.

Gates’ Paradox

On February 25, 2011, Defense Secretary Robert Gates outlined his vision of future conflict in a speech to the United States Military Academy at West Point.³ Perhaps his most controversial remark was that “the most plausible, high-end scenarios for the U.S. military are primarily naval and air engagements.”⁴ In the same paragraph, he suggests that it would be absurd for a future defense secretary to recommend commitment of “a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa.”⁵ In a single sentence, the Secretary discounts the notion of potential US involvement in future large-scale land conflict. Oddly enough, in the previous paragraph, he speaks about “our perfect record” of never being able to predict the next war. In my view, the last of Gates’ three main points rings true.⁶ If “we can’t know with absolute certainty what the future of warfare will hold”, it remains clear we must remain prepared to operate in any environment against a variety of adversaries.⁷

³ Robert M. Gates, Speech, As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, West Point, NY, February 25, 2011, Available from: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1539>, Accessed: March 19th, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Surprisingly, his speech completely dismisses the potential of future large-scale conventional conflicts involving significant ground forces. Those conflicts that might occur, Gates argues, could be resolved favorably with sea and air power. As the world's sole military superpower and given the United States' global interests, it is dangerous to make defense policy based on where and how the nation might prefer to fight. Instead, it seems logical that the United States remain prepared to defend interests wherever and under whatever circumstances they are threatened. If United States interests are threatened in Asia, the Middle East or Africa, the nation will be compelled to act and, therefore, require broad military capability to do so. The stark alternative is stepping back from our key position of military superiority in the world, enabling the rise of peer rivals.

Technology is Not a Principle of War

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld envisioned a smaller, leaner, yet technologically superior force. Through technological advances U.S. forces would "see first," providing complete awareness of the enemy and, therefore, dominate and defeat any known adversary.⁸ Initial operations in Afghanistan seemed to support his concept, as a relatively small number of U.S. and coalition special operations forces (SoF), backed by U.S. airpower and reinforced with limited conventional ground combat units, defeated their Taliban opponents, removed them from power, and secured national objectives and interests at relatively modest cost. In the run up to the Iraq war, Rumsfeld's Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki, was publicly ridiculed over the notion that a sizeable land component would be required to pacify occupied territory captured by this advanced force.⁹ Reality is the only true litmus test for

⁸ Michael Rubin, May 31, 2007, Asymmetrical Threat Concept and its Reflections on International Security <http://www.meforum.org/1696/asymmetrical-threat-concept-and-its-reflections>, Accessed: March 19th, 2011.

⁹ Alyssa Fetini, Dec. 02, 2008, Secretary of Veterans Affairs: Eric Shinseki http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1863062_1863058_1865215,00.html, Accessed: March 19th, 2011.

concepts, as General Shinseki's vision was vindicated while Secretary Rumsfeld's view was proven tragically flawed during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and now subsequently in Afghanistan as well. Both operations required a significant "surge" of increased ground forces to accomplish objectives. The Iraq surge eventually enabled significant force reductions but only after significant additional fighting. The belief is that the same will be true in Afghanistan.

With the Rumsfeld experience clearly in mind, I would offer some alternative views on the Secretary Gates' recent West Point speech. Gates is keen to mention the enemy, regardless of his composition, will seek to fight the United States in an asymmetric fashion in order to negate U.S. technological advantages. Given this thought, is it rational to over-emphasize the value and utility of high-tech air and sea power? One need only think of the ships struck by Exocet missiles in the Falkland's War, the suicide bombing of the USS Cole, or the near loss of an Israeli corvette to a Hezbollah cruise missile as a counterpoint.

In each of these cases, a single strike was able to disable or destroy a modern warship. Many adversarial nations are currently pursuing surface and subsurface technologies to counter U.S. naval superiority. Will anti-ship missiles or speed boats packed with explosives be the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) of the future on the high seas? Technologically advanced forces can be defeated with relatively simple kinetic means. However, not all asymmetric techniques need to be employed in the kinetic realm to defeat or neutralize technological advantages or even superiority. Future adversaries can disperse in complex terrain or operate and live amongst civilians to negate the advantage of airpower. There are currently examples of that today in Afghanistan.

No war or conflict has been solely decided upon by airpower alone either. As the drone strikes in Pakistan and tactical air strikes in Afghanistan are demonstrating, airpower holds the potential for enormous collateral damage in terms of both a physical cost in casualties and a political cost that

undermines the United States' moral authority and galvanizes opposition to her effort. Air and sea power alone cannot secure vital national interests and may require the introduction of conventional ground forces. If significant access to petroleum resources were threatened by regional instability, the United States must be able to secure those resources for the foreseeable future. This might require a large contingent of ground forces, as air and sea power cannot provide close physical security of strategic resources or territory.

Just in Time Crisis?

A current example of the limitations of air and sea power is the crisis in Libya. Shortly after Gate's speech, a political crisis in Libya that began with mass demonstrations sparked by the "Arab Spring" developed into a full-fledged rebellion requiring outside intervention. The United States chose to participate in enforcement of a United Nations sanctioned no fly zone to protect civilians and provide military support to Libyan rebels by engaging Libyan government forces using only air and sea power. This severely constrained effort has led only to partial success by the opposition. Weeks of fighting have turned into months with no decisive results. Without the introduction of ground forces a possible stalemate could ensue and conditions on the ground may result in a divided state, weakening the overall security of the situation and the region. Prolonged combat will only further destroy infrastructure, cause unnecessary suffering and casualties, and create long lasting hatred making reconciliation and future cooperation difficult.

The fact that Gates even commented on the problem saying diversion of troops to resolve the Libyan crisis would detract from ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan only further underscores the point that the United States requires robust ground forces in an ever increasingly complex international

system.¹⁰ As Weick and Sutcliffe suggest in their book Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity, organizations have reached the point of failure when they can no longer execute their core capability or service.¹¹ In this case, has the senior defense leader's rejection of future large-scale land conflicts inadvertently pushed the Army toward failure, as Weick and Sutcliffe argue?

Weick and Sutcliffe also point to "weak signals" that indicate failure is near. In this case, the military being unable to provide additional ground forces to contend with an emerging conflict like Libya, is a clear example of a weak signal that should be taken much more seriously than it has been to this point.¹² The defense establishment is ignoring the fact that for the last decade two major contingency operations have stretched the ground forces to a point where they are no longer able to react in pursuit of national interests. The fifteen month deployment of Army forces in Iraq at the height of the surge, strained the Army in ways unseen in the post-draft era. The unstable international system requires leadership from stable states and nations. This could mean everything from stability operations to regime change missions. If these options are not available to the President, then the DoD has severely limited the United States' ability to influence the geo-political landscape and defend vital national interests.

No One can Guess the Next War

While the prospect for a large conventional conflict may not be the most likely scenario, a future state-on-state conflict may be the most dangerous scenario. Let me review some of the potential scenarios.

¹⁰ Christoph von Marschall, Obama Does Not Want to Lead the War in Libya, Die Zeit, March 21, 2011, Available from: <http://watchingamerica.com/News/94703/obama-does-not-want-to-lead-the-war-in-libya>, Accessed May 11, 2011.

¹¹ Weick, Karl E. & Sutcliffe, Kathleen M., "Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity." Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2001, pg. 3.

¹² Ibid. pg. 4.

The Middle East is a region of the world where continuous tensions and United States national interests remain entangled for the foreseeable future. First, as the withdrawal date nears in Iraq, it appears likely the United States will pull a majority of combat forces out of the country in accordance with the current Strategic Framework Agreement.¹³ Iraq is surrounded by traditional enemies, most notably Iran. If tensions between Iran and Iraq evolve into a conventional war, the United States might be obligated to defend her newest regional ally having left Iraq critically vulnerable with withdrawal of significant ground forces. With the destruction of the Iraqi Army during the war, subsequent disbanding of the remaining armed forces, and slow rebuilding efforts, Iraq has been reduced to one of the regions weakest military powers, in effect, upsetting the balance of power in the Gulf region. It remains in the United States' national interest to keep the Gulf region free from open conflict and may require the use of force or conventional deterrence to do so.

A second potential flashpoint is in South Asia. India and Pakistan have fought three wars since the end of WW II, both continue to pursue modern weapons systems, and have developed nuclear weapons, creating a hostile environment similar to the US/USSR at the height of the Cold War. The two states are locked in a territorial dispute over control of Kashmir, frequently leading to open exchanges of artillery fire. Both are also vying for influence over the new regime in Afghanistan. India has accused Pakistan of sponsoring regional terrorism and holds them accountable for the Mumbai attacks. Another terrorist attack in India, violent instability in Pakistan, or an escalation of the confrontation over the Kashmir may lead to a conflict between the two nuclear armed regional powers. While it is unlikely the US would be involved in the opening stages of a conflict between Pakistan and India, it would be in the interest of the United States to contain or even terminate conflict between the two nations.

¹³ Office of the Press Secretary, White House, December 4, 2008. The Strategic Framework Agreement and the Security Agreement with Iraq, Available from: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/12/print/20081204-6.html>, Accessed: 25 May, 2011

Efforts to contain or limit a conflict have often led to the involvement of the United States. Direct involvement has not always occurred at the beginning of a crisis. However, a brief review of U.S. history in the two World Wars clearly show circumstances compelled her participation well after their start and required U.S. military ground action to terminate them definitively. In fact, in both world wars the ground intervention was precipitated initially by sea power, and in the case of WW II, a combination of sea and air power. Yet in both cases, decisive action and results were gained through the application of ground forces. Modern conflict has often been started using technological means, but rudimentary boots on the ground have been required to complete the victory.

Another potential large-scale conventional scenario in Asia remains on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea cannot be labeled either as a rational actor or a stable state. They have the fourth largest army in the world and possess nuclear weapons. The US has stated it would not allow North Korean nuclear weapons to remain unsecured in the event of a North Korean regime collapse and would commit forces to ensure the security of those weapons.¹⁴ In a North Korean regime collapse scenario, China has publicly stated it will not allow US or South Korean forces north of the 38th parallel.¹⁵ Positions like these by nations in the early 20th Century were the reason the “iron dice” rolled at the start of WW I.¹⁶

As history has proven time and time again, nations are often forced into wars not of their choosing. Throughout history, the United States has been attacked, or responded to an attack on an ally more than having fought wars of choice. Clearly past history demonstrates the United States must be ready to respond to attack. Much like other highly reliable organizations, the United States military cannot afford failure, as this could jeopardize national interests and under the most extreme circumstances the

¹⁴ Bonnie Glaser, et al, Responding to Change on the Korean Peninsula, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2010, Available from: http://csis.org/files/publication/100506_Glaser_RespondingtoChange_Web.pdf, Accessed: March 19th, 2011, pg. 28.

¹⁵ Glaser, pg. 17.

¹⁶ John G Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War*, 10th ed., Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008, pp. 3-4.

continued existence of the United States and/or its way of life.¹⁷ While at the current time it seems unlikely the United States will be confronted militarily by a peer competitor, it is hard to ignore recent weak signals of the nation's financial system, waning international support, and the fact that the United States' ground forces are extremely over-extended.

Many recent American military actions have required the introduction of ground forces to resolve the fight. After an extended bombing campaign during the first Gulf War, ground troops were needed to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. United States peacekeeping missions of the late 1990s required the presence of robust ground forces to enforce UN mandates, Security Council resolutions, or negotiated settlements to international disputes. Following the 9/11 attacks, ground forces ultimately unseated the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The unprecedented, record breaking ground attack into Iraq in 2003 defeated the regime within three weeks, forced them into hiding, and ultimately led to a new representative political solution. The apparent lack of a decisive outcome in the current military action in Libya can be attributed in part to the lack of commitment by nations to fully engage in a conflict by introducing ground forces. Ground forces routinely are the decisive element in conflicts.¹⁸

If called into any regional stability scenario, whether to secure loose nuclear weapons or protect a vulnerable population or critical natural resource, dominant land power must be employed to face any potential conventional adversary, underwrite vital national interests, and guarantee success. One point is certain, the United States will not be able to dictate where she will fight, but if the United States limits future military options she may be unable to appropriately respond to future threats. T.R. Fehrenbach clearly warns us of the futility of ignoring the requirement for ground forces when he stated, "Americans in 1950 rediscovered something that since Hiroshima they had forgotten: you may fly over a land

¹⁷ Weick & Sutcliffe, p. 45.

¹⁸ Douglas A. Macgregor, *Breaking the Phalanx: A New Design for Landpower in the 21st Century*, 1997, Praeger, Westport, CT, pp9-11.

forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it and wipe it clean of life — but if you desire to defend it, protect it and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman legions did, by putting your young men into the mud.”¹⁹

Why Not “Succumb” to Our Vital Interests?

Given the uncertain nature of the future, it remains prudent to prepare for multiple scenarios, and if you had to ensure success against one in order to guarantee the survival of your country, it seems reasonable to prepare for the most dangerous scenario. While unable to predict the exact scenario that requires a large land response, the United States must not ignore Secretary Gates’ warning that “we have never once gotten it right” and must therefore prepare for a broad spectrum of threats, including the potential need for a large conventional force. Secretary Gates’ comment about not “succumbing to... ‘next-war-itis’” is somewhat ironic and paradoxical given his recent remarks.²⁰

Gates once suggested that deliberate avoidance of excessive “next-war-itis” stems from prudent recognition that one will rarely succeed predicting the character of the next war. Thus, Secretary Gates’ assertion that the next war will be fought primarily with sea and air power seems suspect. The US must maintain robust defense capabilities that are able to defeat all known threats, while maintaining enough conventional capability and flexibility to react to the spectrum of unknown threats. The nature of warfare will not change. As Sir Michael Howard describes warfare, “Western societies have learned how to kill on an enormous scale, but they may still fight at a disadvantage against agrarian age armies who have not forgotten how to die and know well enough how to kill.”²¹

¹⁹ T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* 50th Anniversary Edition, Dulles, VA: Brassey’s, 2000, p. 290.

²⁰ Gates, February 25, 2011.

²¹ Michael Howard, ‘How Much can Technology Change Warfare?’ in Michael Howard and John F. Guilmartin, Jr., *Two Historians in Technology and War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute Monographs, 2004), pp. 5–6, Available from: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ssi/2hist.pdf>, Accessed: March 19th, 2011.

Warfare remains a violent endeavor. The United States must possess the conventional capabilities to completely overwhelm any potential adversary to enforce our will upon the unwilling. At a minimum, if called to project land combat power into an environment, the United States must not only possess the capacity to achieve the mission, the force should be robust enough protect itself. I believe this includes a range of heavy, medium, and light capabilities able to sustain a continuous presence in any theater of operations.

If the US intends to remain a global power that can physically reach into any region to protect vital national interests, she must retain a viable ground force. The US should maintain the capability to conduct conventional forced entry operations as a majority of the major military operations of the past twenty years involved entry into environments that were semi-permissive at best. The United States will need to maintain credible ground combat and stabilization capabilities to counter conventional and unconventional threats and secure the peace. While future nation building efforts in the Eastern Hemisphere may be a repugnant thought in the mind of senior defense planners, the United States could be forced into action based upon regional economic or humanitarian interests or at the request of threatened allies. Vital national interests will dictate where and when the nation deploys forces in the future.

Deterrence alone might be reason enough to maintain a robust conventional capability. One cannot discount the deterrent effect a large conventional force can impose on international stability.

Deterrence is similar to preventative maintenance in that one only knows of a mistake when confronted with failure. By maintaining a credible, deployable, conventional force the United States can deter other hostile actors from pushing conflicts toward open military confrontation. Deterrence should be the essence of military readiness. Deploying a “lighter” force to stabilize a region may only embolden rogue actors — state and non-state to attack US forces conducting stability operations. The United States’

involvement in Bosnia was sometimes criticized, as heavily armored formations deployed into the region to enforce a peace agreement. But the reason the United States became involved was that less capable European forces could not “enforce” the peace nor properly deter opposition elements from engaging in further conflict or ethnic cleansing.

Conclusion: The Virtue of Fiscal Courage

Ground armies are traditionally expensive and cumbersome to maintain in peacetime, yet absolutely vital in war. How can the Secretary of Defense lecture cadets that “the hard fought lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan are not merely “observed” but truly “learned” – incorporated into the service’s DNA and institutional memory” while inferring that the need for a large conventional army may lose in the Pentagon budget battles?²² As Secretary Gates himself commented, options to react to the rebellion in Libya are limited as any diversion of troops to that region may impact current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Is this truly the time to chart a course where the United States relies on even less conventional ground capability?

By dismissing the very notion of future land-centric conventional combat operations, Gates implies defense strategists can predict the future of warfare. One can only hope if defense planners continue down the path he prescribes that he is actually the first person able to do so. Otherwise the Department of Defense will have again failed to provide appropriate forces to fight and win the nation’s wars. If “great necessities draw out great virtues”, then it is incumbent upon the United States defense leadership to grasp the necessity and need for a large conventional army and have the virtue to defend

²² Gates, February 25, 2011.

and fight for the requirement to maintain a robust conventional force on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.²³

If the senior civilian defense leaders do not understand the necessity of maintaining a sufficient ground combat capability, they may be preparing to draft another sad chapter of “Americas’ First Battles.”²⁴

The outgoing Secretary of Defense should offer this advice to the incoming secretary. Instead of limiting the options of future US leaders, why not chart a path towards increased flexibility and readiness through the maintenance of a robust ground element. An outright reluctance to act in Libya may have been due in part to a lack of depth in ground forces. Is that not a clear weak signal that the United States has reached the limits of its capability and strength? Should we not then seek to maintain ground combat capability to match the current operational environment? If defense planners and strategists are only predicting more instability, it is illogical to chart a course that limits our defense options and forces us back to a path of isolationism.

²³ Gates, February 25, 2011.

²⁴ Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, Eds. *America’s First Battles 1776-1965*, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1986.

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