

From the Chairman

It's Time for a New Deterrence Model

It is way past time to reexamine our strategic thinking about deterrence. General Vessey's belief in "cleaning clocks," characteristically blunt though it was, summed up nicely the urgency and the intent of our Cold War mentality. Unfortunately, that is just about where we left it—back in the Cold War, strewn among the rubble of the Berlin Wall.

Deterrence today is tougher and more complex; more than one nation can now reach out and touch us with nuclear missiles. Americans are potential targets of terrorism wherever they travel, and regional instability in several places around the globe could easily erupt into large-scale conflict. Even before Russia's move against Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August, U.S. allies were revisiting longstanding assumptions about America's protective security umbrella.

The United States may not face a nation-state enemy right now, but as many writers in this issue of *Joint Force Quarterly* point out, the threats we do face are just as treacherous, just as deadly, and even more difficult to discern.

Yet we have done precious little spade-work to advance the theory of deterrence. Many, if not most, of the individuals who worked deterrence in the 1970s and 1980s—the real experts at this discipline—are not doing it anymore. And we have not even tried to find their replacements. It is as if we all breathed a collective sigh of relief when the Soviet Union collapsed and said to ourselves, "Well, I guess we don't need to worry about *that* anymore."

But worry we must. And act quickly we should. Terrorists *are* trying to obtain weapons of mass destruction. Some states, against international pressure, *are* trying to build and/or improve their own nuclear weapons. The specter of state-on-state conflict, though diminished, has *not* disappeared.

We need a new model for deterrence theory, and we need it now. Time is not on our side.

This model must possess at least three particular attributes.

First, it should espouse the highest standards of nuclear preparedness. The bulk

Our strategy is one of preventing war by making it self-evident to our enemies that they're going to get their clocks cleaned if they start one.

—General John W. Vessey, Jr., USA
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1982–1985



B-2 Spirit stealth bomber in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom

30th Space Command Squadron (Richard Freeland)

of our strategic deterrence still relies upon the effectiveness of our nuclear arsenal. U.S. nuclear forces contribute uniquely and fundamentally to deterrence through their ability to impose costs and deny benefits to an adversary in an exceedingly rapid and devastating manner. They cast a lengthy shadow.

Regrettably, a lengthy shadow has also been cast over our own competence in handling this arsenal. We must turn this around.

We must revitalize our nuclear support infrastructure. We must hold ourselves accountable to unimpeachably high standards of training, leadership, and management. And we must recruit and then retain the scientific expertise to preserve and extend our technological edge in nuclear weaponry. Barring these improvements, a legacy force structure supported by a neglected infrastructure only invites adversary misbehavior and miscalculation. Deterrence then becomes anything but.

Secondly, the model must be credible. The enemy, or potential enemy, must be

convinced that taking a specific action will bring them more harm than benefit. General Vessey would certainly agree with that, would he not? But credibility today requires flexibility.

Flexibility in our deterrence construct hedges against the possibility that adversaries might incorrectly perceive their actions as "below the threshold" of U.S. resolve and response. We must manage that threshold by looking at ways to limit the pain an adversary can cause through advanced defensive measures. Adversaries must know that they have a limited ability to hurt us.

We must also be able to act proportionally and across the whole of government, escalating and deescalating tension, predicting as best we can when a deterrence strategy is *about to fail* and shifting as required. These on-ramps and off-ramps provide a vital measure of control in conflict and give both sides a chance to solve problems more carefully.

A big part of credibility, of course, lies in our conventional capability. The capability to project U.S. military power globally and conduct effective theater-level operations across the domains of land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, and information—including the capability to win decisively—remains essential to deterrence effectiveness.

We must therefore address our conventional force structure and its readiness as a deterrent factor, especially after 7 years at war. We must enhance our capability to rapidly locate and destroy targets. We must conduct sufficient contingency planning that considers all facets of escalation and deescalation in crisis management. And we must improve conventional global strike capability, further develop global missile defense systems, and modernize our strategic weapons systems and infrastructure.

Nor can we forget the conventional capabilities of our partners and friends. We must strengthen *their* capacity to deter *their* enemies, and we must stay engaged globally. Coalition military cooperation and integration can and do have a tremendous impact on an adversary's perception of the political will of the United States and its allies.

Lastly, any modern model of deterrence needs to address the challenges posed by extremists and ideologues. How do we account for the fact that traditional concepts of deterrence do not work against a terrorist whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents? How do we deter an idea or a movement?

There are no easy answers. The deterrence of state sponsors is a start, but so, too, must we find ways to delegitimize the idea itself and to subvert the movement. That notion has been at the heart of the counterinsurgency strategy that we have employed successfully in Iraq: replace the fear that terrorists hope to engender with the very hope they fear to encounter.

Give people something positive to hold on to instead of something negative to avoid. Give parents a chance to raise their children to a better standard of living than the one they themselves enjoyed. Do that and we deter not the tactics of terrorists—they will still try to kill—but rather the ends that they seek to achieve. And *that* is deterrence of a truly strategic nature.

Of course, this improved stability cannot be achieved by military means alone. Again, Iraq illuminates the point. Security on



the ground has been quite necessary there, but it was never sufficient. Political reconciliation, economic development, social and cultural accommodation, and a higher sense of Iraqi nationhood and ownership have all proven vital to the progress we have witnessed. And all of it was the result of a truly international and interagency effort.

More than 40 years ago, Henry Kissinger warned that deterrence is “above all a psychological problem. The assessment of risks on which it depends becomes less and less precise in the face of weapons of unprecedented novelty and destructiveness. A bluff taken seriously is more useful than a serious threat interpreted as a bluff.”

Today, I would agree that deterrence is still fundamentally a psychological problem. But the time for bluffing is over. We need to

be ready—actually and completely—to deter a wide range of new threats. It is not just about cleaning someone else's clock anymore. We need a new model of deterrence that helps us bring our own clock up to speed with the pace and the scope of the challenges of this new century. Time hack . . . now.

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