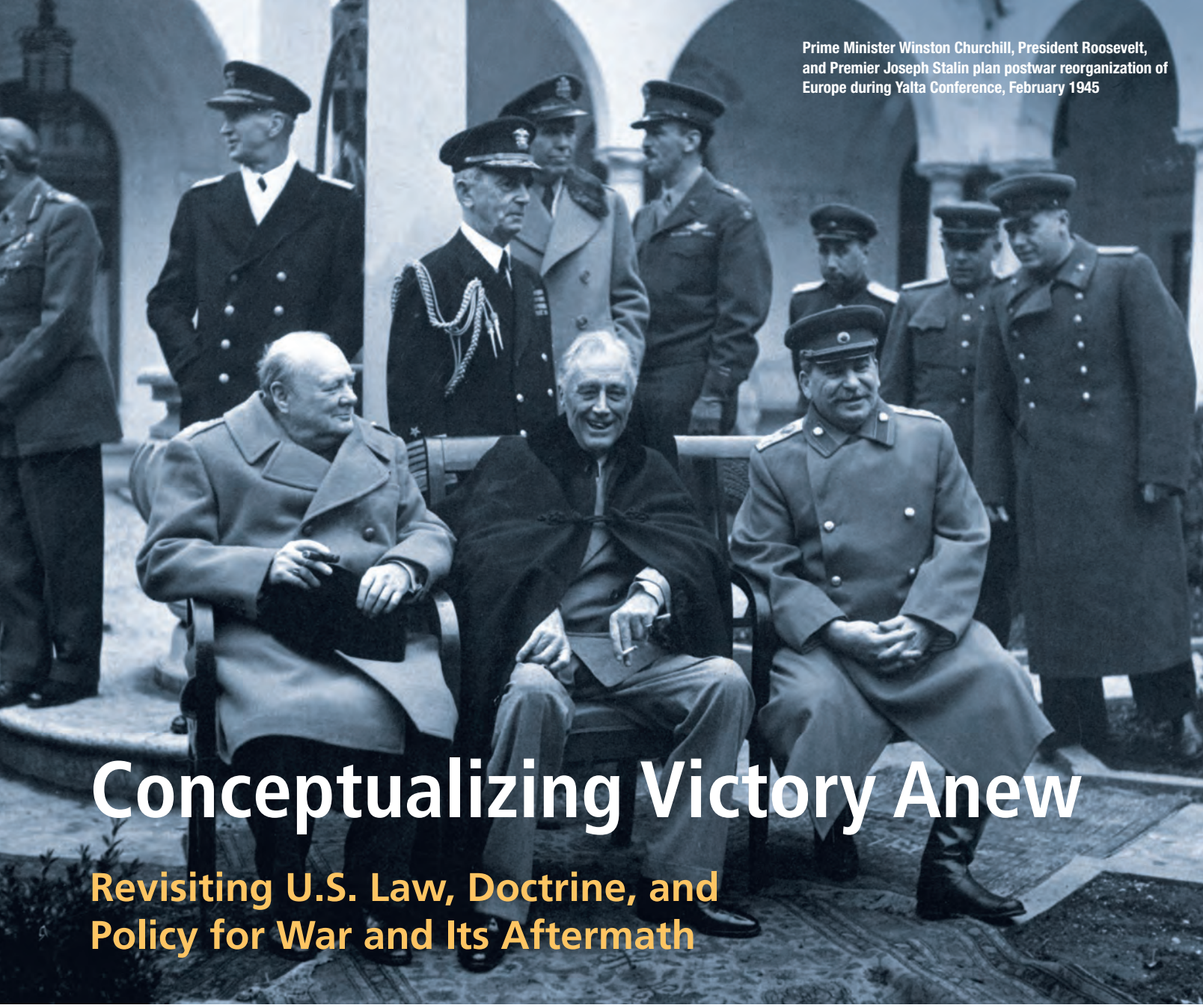

Prime Minister Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt, and Premier Joseph Stalin plan postwar reorganization of Europe during Yalta Conference, February 1945

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Conceptualizing Victory Anew

Revisiting U.S. Law, Doctrine, and Policy for War and Its Aftermath

By STEPHEN L. MELTON

The victorious strategist seeks battle only after the victory has been won, whereas he who is destined to defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory.

—Sun Tzu

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As we lick our many wounds and salvage what we can from our costly and confused wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is urgent that we address the intellectual errors that paved the way for our lack of success, lest we risk underperforming in future military endeavors as well. This article introduces four strategic "reframes" of our postmodern conceptualization of warfare that are needed to restore the effectiveness the American military was accustomed to through World War II. The goal is not to rehash the sins of the past few wars, which have been amply exposed in numerous writings, but to illuminate a path forward.

Reframe 1

Wars must be won first at the strategic level, then at the operational level, and then at the tactical level. Our strategic-level lodestones—the National Security Act of 1947 and Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986—have created cross-purposes at the strategic level of war and have proven inadequate in producing victory in war. These laws must be rewritten to ensure strategic unity of command.

Sadly, the record of the U.S. military since World War II is mainly half-victories and defeats: Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Despite valiant efforts by Servicemembers in the tactical units, numerous battlefield victories, and enormous costs

borne by the taxpayers for standing forces and wartime supplemental expenditures, the Department of Defense (DOD) has produced disappointing results in the conflicts it has directed. The systemic failure occurs at the strategic level.

Because our military professes to have "strategic corporals," theater-level strategic commanders, and battalion commanders performing operational art—all of which are oxymoronic formulations—I propose the following clarification regarding the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war, which are consistent with Army doctrine prior to 1986.

The *strategic* level resides primarily in Washington, DC, and consists of the President, his Cabinet and advisors, Congress, DOD, and Departments of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and other agencies. These are the organizers of victory who calculate and justify the need for war, determine its aims and objectives, and raise and train the various armed forces needed to fight it. They fund war, declare it, coordinate and prioritize responses to the various unforeseen events, and finally terminate it once its political objectives are reached. Moreover, the strategic level must conceptualize and institutionalize the tactical and operational methods the military units will employ to win the war, to include training and equipping individual Servicemembers and units of all sizes. A seamless synthesis of the entire war effort across all levels and warfighting functions—from the Oval Office, to the industrial base, to the individual foxhole or battle station—can only be done at the strategic level.

The military's *operational* level commanders, the four-star combatant commanders in U.S. Pacific Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and elsewhere, are entrusted to execute the decisions made in Washington within their areas of operation and with the forces they are assigned. They may advise the strategic decisionmakers, but they are executors, not deciders, of strategic policy. Their job is to employ the forces assigned to them in the most efficient and effective manner possible within the constraints of the overall strategy. The *tactical* level consists of the Servicemembers and units—Army divisions, air wings, naval task forces—that actually do the fighting, dying, and rebuilding.

The current failure of the Nation to properly organize its strategic center traces back to the National Security Act of 1947, which placed overall responsibility for coordination and integration of the military effort in the civilian-dominated National Security Council and Office of the Secretary of Defense. A primary shortcoming was that the act deliberately opted "not to establish a single Chief of Staff over the armed forces nor an overall armed forces general staff."[1] Having eschewed the successful models of strategic leadership offered by the World War II era, during which both the Army Chief of Staff and Chief of Naval Operations exercised staff as well as command authorities, the ambitious 1947 reform sacrificed a clear and enforceable system for centralized military command in favor of assured civilian control, hoping that the creation of an overarching DOD would enable coordination, integration, and unity of effort among the various departments, agencies, and staffs. The act created the national security system that failed to win in either Korea or Vietnam.

Attempting to fix the inter-Service rivalries and other shortcomings of the 1947 reform—made manifest by Vietnam, Operation *Desert One*, and Grenada—the Goldwater-Nichols Act further diminished the role of the Pentagon by making the *operational* commanders the primary war planners, moving a critical *strategic* function away from Washington. Rather than reforming the flawed warfighting abilities of the Pentagon, the 1986 law sought to bypass the established strategic military structure altogether and create new "theater strategic" headquarters around the combatant commanders. The act enhanced the relationship between the highest civilian leaders and operational combatant commanders overseas, but by doing so relegated the military's strategic center—the Joint Chiefs of Staff and military departments—to an advisory and supporting role.

The results in these two-and-a-half decades since Goldwater-Nichols have been embarrassing for the country: not thinking through the cease-fire terms during *Desert Storm*, the vacuum of effort in Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul, and the failure to adequately plan for the occupation of Iraq.

The theater strategic model has failed for two main reasons. First, the inherent lack of strategic vision and experience in the operational headquarters militates against getting the planning right, except perhaps the kinetic part. For instance, who on General Tommy Frank's 2001 U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) staff had previously planned and executed a successful invasion and occupation of a hostile foreign country and then installed a new government acceptable to both that country's population and the United States? The necessary perspective and experience, largely dating from World War II and its aftermath, reside mainly in the historical archives in Washington. The young men on the USCENTCOM staff, rotating through their billets on their all-too-brief assignment cycles, could never match the institutional wisdom that must be maintained in Washington. Neither can an operational commander employ troops and units that the strategic level has not already envisioned, procured, equipped, trained, and deployed to the theater of war. Force creation, flow, and rotation are strategic functions largely beyond the control of the operational commander.

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Second, the multiple centers of strategic thinking and authority—political leaders, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and various combatant commanders—lack the firm central direction that can assure the needed unity and consistency of effort. Indeed, the proliferating ranks of four-star generals and admirals, with their overlapping and competing responsibilities, often seem more interested in staking out turf and pursuing pet agendas than winning wars. As a result, Service chiefs quarrel with overseas combatant commanders; combatant commanders spar with their operational commanders; political appointees bicker with the uniformed Service chiefs; and opportunistic politicians publicly champion like-minded generals and admirals. Acting as the main referee in this chaotic system, the President has been forced to relieve or replace operational commanders in all our major conflicts of the past 60 years—General Douglas MacArthur in Korea, General William Westmoreland in Vietnam, Lieutenant General

U.S. Navy (Todd Frantom)

Airmen pose at monument in Baghdad commemorating Saddam Hussein's declaration of victory in Iraq-Iran war

Ricardo Sanchez in Iraq, and Generals Stanley McChrystal and David McKiernan in Afghanistan. The National Security Act and Goldwater-Nichols have led to the piecemealing of authority and culpability at the military's strategic level and created the conditions for poorly conceptualized, planned, orchestrated, and resourced wars, resulting in Pyrrhic battlefield victories and disappointing postwar governance and stability outcomes. Too often we have been lured by operational commanders into, to paraphrase and expand on General Omar Bradley's assessment of the Korean War, fighting the wrong war in the wrong place against the wrong enemy in the wrong manner.

Somehow, we must simplify the military's strategic apex, better subordinate the operational commanders to the Pentagon, and insist that the Pentagon do its job. The strategic leadership should not be allowed to dodge its warmaking responsibility by proclaiming it is giving the operational commander what he requested. Rather, it is the role of the strategic leadership to determine and provide the ends, ways, and means of the war, and allow the operational commanders to focus on the critical functions only their headquarters can accomplish—the detailed coordination and integration of the actions of the tactical units under their respective commands.

Consequently, strategic *command* of all operational forces must be invested in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Supported by a joint planning and operations staff, the up-gunned Joint Chiefs would become a warfighting headquarters directly supervising subordinate combatant commanders in their areas of responsibility around the world. The military's strategic leaders should not be burdened with mundane bureaucratic requirements as are our current Service chiefs. Freeing the various chiefs of staff to think through and organize victory, uniformed deputy chiefs of staff from the respective Services would support Joint Chiefs decisions with the necessary programming, coordination, and budgetary requests, while also exercising oversight over force generation, equipping, training, and other support tasks. At the highest level, busywork should never be allowed to drown out purposeful thinking about global military strategy and victory in war.

Reframe 2

The current joint and Army focus on *operations*, however relevant at the operational level of war, is not helpful in winning *wars*, which must of necessity be conceived, resourced, and executed at the *strategic* level.[2] From a strategic level, wars are most powerfully described as offensive, defensive, and limited objective, and the operations and tactics of a war are best understood in that typological context. Current joint and Army doctrine, known as full-spectrum operations, denies that there are distinct types of wars, promulgates no positive theory for obtaining victory in war, and is not a sufficiently powerful way of thinking about present or potential wars.

The Army's first version of full-spectrum operations doctrine was published in June 2001, having been drafted in the strategic abyss that began with the end of the Cold War. The doctrine boils down to two banal

observations: that Army forces work as part of a joint and interagency all-of-government team, and that Army units conduct a gamut of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks in different proportions for each mission as required. Our wars since 9/11 have not vindicated the doctrine, but rather have exposed its manifold flaws: its failure to state a positive theory of victory in warfare, its failure to acknowledge types of wars, its operational and tactical focus, and its failure to properly affix primary responsibility for occupation and stabilization.

As bad as Army doctrine has become, the problem is worse at the joint level, not because the doctrine is different than the Army's, but because it merely mimics the Army's full-spectrum operations themes. Focused on the overseas joint force commander—the operational level of war—the joint doctrine fails to discuss or clarify for the reader the most important level of war: the strategic. Rather, the doctrine assumes that the strategic guidance delivered by the proper authorities is appropriate for the situation at hand, meaning the burden for delivering victory now rests with the operational commander. Amazingly, the terms *war* and *victory* are never defined or discussed in joint doctrine as it attempts to mention and categorize the full range of military *operations* against a backdrop of "persistent conflict."

In the view of the full-spectrum operations theorists, wars contain a combination of offensive, defensive, and stability *operations*, but wars themselves are not considered to be *strategically* offensive, defensive, or stabilizing in nature. Our doctrine makes no *strategic* distinction, for example, between the historical World War II that actually happened—the one that began with Germany invading its neighbors—and an alternative hypothetical war that would have begun with the Allies invading Germany. Both wars are equivalent "contests of will."

The failure to distinguish between types of wars constitutes a mortal doctrinal flaw. The terms *offense* and *defense* should categorize not only different types of operations and tactics, but also different kinds of wars at the strategic level.

Offensive wars are characterized by the invasion of another country with the intent of replacing its government with one more suitable to the invader's purposes. Success in these wars requires conventional offensive military operations, unconventional counterinsurgency operations, and the invader's governance of the occupied population until a new indigenous government installed by the occupier gains the acceptance of the population. These wars not only are difficult to win, but also require tremendous resources and a decade or more of effort, as Iraq and Afghanistan illustrate. Modern history demonstrates that initiators of offensive war rarely achieve the enduring victory they promise.

Defensive wars are fought to protect a nation's government from foreign or internal enemies, as well as to safeguard the property and citizens of that nation and its allies. Success requires the defender to raise the aggressor's real or perceived cost of pursuing the war to the point that initiating or continuing the war becomes disadvantageous to him. Defensive wars tend to follow a progression of strategies—beginning with deterrence and proceeding in turn to conventional defensive operations, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, civil disobedience, and finally useless and costly passivity. The modern historical record counsels that one of these strategies, whether sooner or later, will likely succeed in making the attacker cut his losses and return home. Counteroffensive operations to liberate occupied territory are often part of defensive wars. Similarly, stability operations and security force assistance missions are correctly seen as defensive in nature because they support and strengthen established governance systems. The Cold War, from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization perspective, was conducted as a preparation for defensive war.

Limited objective wars are fought to change other nations' behaviors, to redraw boundaries, or for other purposes, but are not aimed at changing the governance of either of the combatants. Often one party is clearly the aggressor, but just as often opinions differ regarding which side is in the right. The main point is that the domestic governance in both combatant countries is not at issue and both sides strive to contain their violence to resolving the specific issue at hand. Controlling escalation is a primary concern. The Falklands War of 1982 is a recent example of a limited war.

The differences between the three types of war are supremely significant not only at the strategic level, but also at the operational and tactical. Not only are the war aims distinct, each envisioning different postbellum outcomes, but each type of war requires radically different ways and means, to include diplomacy, justifications, narratives, phasing, force structure, defeat mechanisms, expense, troop organization and training, and time horizons. The nature of these differences—so critical to properly organizing for victory in any envisioned war—is lost in the military's new and disappointing doctrine.

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UN forces withdraw from Pyongyang, North Korea, 1950

Reframe 3

In *offensive war*, the land component commander, who is generally the senior Army commander, must be tasked to perform military governance over the occupied population, and the Department of the Army must be tasked to provide him the necessary specialized units—manned, organized, trained, and equipped—to execute the military governance mission. Our current "unity of effort" approach led by the Department of State is a blueprint for disappointment at best, but more probably failure.[3]

Basic Field Manual 27–5, *Military Government*, published in 1940, was the pithy (only 57 paragraphs) doctrinal publication that paved the way for our occupation and rebuilding of our World War II enemies, which we rapidly and successfully transformed into willing partners and allies. Its ideas were simple but powerful: unity of command; specially selected and trained governance Soldiers in military uniform, organized to supervise the preexisting enemy government; Army responsibility to generate and train the military government forces in the needed numbers; and the requirement to establish military governance immediately on the heels of offensive combat operations.

Had we repeated our World War II doctrinal prescription in Iraq and Afghanistan, we might have been able to seize the "golden hours" provided by our successful initial combat operations. Instead, we ad-libbed our occupations, and in doing so left vacuums of authority in both countries that still damage our credibility, undermine our noble purposes, and play into the hands of forces opposed to our interests.[4] After failure seemed imminent in both countries, the President had to order military "surges" as a belated effort to retrieve the situations and build something positive.

Our path in our current wars was first to ignore or minimize the governance problems our invasions would create, then to place State Department civilians in charge of the stabilization and reconstruction missions (consider Ambassador L. Paul Bremer and the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, 2003–2004, and National Security Presidential Directive 44, "Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization," in 2005). As these approaches failed, DOD found it necessary to issue Directive 3000.05, "Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations," acknowledging the State Department lead but cautioning that "U.S. military forces shall be prepared to perform all tasks necessary to establish or maintain order when civilians cannot do so."[5] Still, employing mostly Army capabilities within the framework of a civilian-led effort has proven only marginally successful, due to the "lack of integrated capability and capacity of civilian agencies with which the military must partner."[6] Nearly a decade into our occupation of Afghanistan, the civilian-led "all-of-government" approach is still understaffed, poorly resourced, and producing inadequate results.

The final coordinating draft of Joint Publication 3–07, *Stability Operations*, dated April 22, 2010, greets the reader with more than 200 pages of vague and confused text. A testament to the State Department's new lead in postconflict stability, the manual tasks no Service chief or military commander to be responsible for anything specific, but merely enumerates stability operations functions and considerations, all the while stressing their criticality. The thrust of the manual is that "we" collectively have much to do, with no one "tasked" specifically to do it. This is, of course, a doctrinal blueprint for disaster.

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Having the military responsible for winning the kinetic war in what the military has come to term *phase 3*, the decisive fight, but not responsible for winning the peace in phase four, stability and reconstruction, creates a counterproductive schism in command authority and accountability at the all-important moment when populations assess their new occupiers and form lasting impressions. The precedents established in that critical transition, for better or worse, will color all the efforts that follow. Commanders must employ armed force in a manner consistent with the peace ultimately desired, the former leading directly into the latter.

It is probably too late in the game to salvage "victory" in Iraq and Afghanistan; our moments of opportunity in both those countries are likely long gone. But we can at least recognize and correct the faulty constructs that led us to unsatisfactory results in our current wars. Offensive war and its aftermath—occupation—must be a land component commander—that is, Army—responsibility, supported by the other Services and agencies.

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Sailors spell out "Victory" at Great Lakes Naval Training Station, 1917

Reframe 4

The urgent doctrinal need now is to develop strategic concepts likely to deliver victories in defensive and limited wars. The disappointments and costs of Iraq and Afghanistan make it less likely that we will initiate new offensive wars in the near future, and more likely that we will have to defend our interests abroad.

Not all wars need to end with our occupation of foreign populations, converting our former enemies into future allies at enormous cost. We can defend our interests and allies without invading enemy nations. We can challenge the threatening behaviors of our adversaries without demanding their unconditional surrender. However, we will need to abandon our recent grand strategy of military expansion, largely through offensive war, and instead hone our thoughts regarding defensive war.

Urgently, we must prioritize our interests abroad and balance means, which are likely to shrink as we reduce our budget deficit, with ends. We must also review our methods of defense, choosing lower cost options whenever possible. Inevitably, we must force our allies to shoulder more of their own defensive burdens as we increasingly assume a supporting role. The U.S. military should never be the reflexive force of first employment abroad, it being better for us to assist allies than to assume their burdens outright.

Our strategic adversaries are expert at using proxy wars—wars fought for them by their local allies rather than their own forces—to advance their interests and damage ours. Our counterstrategies to date have been largely ineffective and wasteful, failing as they do to affix responsibility and punish accordingly.

Our primary challenge going forward will not be our current focus, the radical Islamic terror campaign against American modernity and power, but rather the ascent of China, which could become the world's hyperpower within decades. That nation will force us to adopt a defensive strategy, testing our alliances in the Pacific and Asia and, indeed, throughout the world.

It is unlikely that China will be satisfied with incorporating itself into the American "Washington Consensus" that we built and institutionalized after World War II; rather, it will endeavor to pigeonhole the United States into a subsidiary role in China's emerging global version of the old "Middle Kingdom."[7] The Chinese are foreign power realists, not liberals, and tend to view power as a zero-sum game.[8] Their relative national power can rise only if ours falls.

Chinese notions of harmony suggest that we must be taught to accept our new tributary status. Reward (for example, profitable trade for U.S. corporations and U.S. Treasury debt purchases for now) will increasingly be mixed with punishment, as China asserts its interests through hybrid or "unrestricted" warfare.[9] Many of the lessons will be delivered by China's growing global network of proxies—that is, North Korea, Iran, and perhaps Venezuela. Others may be delivered directly by Chinese forces following their new doctrine of "high-tech local wars."[10]

Strategically, we must determine the art of the possible regarding our relationship with Beijing and develop an achievable endstate for the emerging new world. Operationally, we must think through how we will respond to Chinese strikes, military and nonmilitary, within that strategic context. We must appreciate that our reactions will set precedents that will redefine our relationship with China and, indeed, the world, and that we have a low probability of reacting correctly if we have not anticipated and thought through our counteractions ahead of time. Accordingly, we must develop defensive and limited war doctrine and plans, focused on parrying challenges without risking unwanted escalation or setting adverse precedents.[11]

No Substitute for Victory

The American citizenry needs to establish higher expectations for military competence—a new standard that the Pentagon must get the war right before it even begins, not blunder through years of painful and costly heuristic learning as the prospect of victory diminishes. Modern kinetic wars are measured in a handful of days. Golden hours in occupation are ephemeral. The opportunity for military success is often presented only once. Miss that precious moment, and we will ultimately fail, even though we may labor many more years before we come to that realization. We have simply got to wage the war right the first time.

A military as lavishly supported with both talented people and resources as America's can—and must—do better than it has over the past decades in defining and achieving victory. As we honored our dead this past Memorial Day, I could not help but consider whether our strategic military establishment is "organizing the victory" as effectively as it could, or needs to. As heroic as our Servicemembers are at the tactical level where the bullets fly and the dying gets done, our privates, sergeants, and lieutenants cannot redeem the strategic errors made in Washington. We should heartily question whether the Nation's legal and intellectual constructs regarding war are as powerful and productive as they proclaim, or are flawed to the point that we are squandering the power of the Nation and the efforts of our most patriotic young citizens. The evidence gathered from our recent wars suggests the worst case. We can and should do better. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] The National Security Act of 1947, section 2.

[2] For a more detailed discussion, see Justin Kelly and Mike Brennan, *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2009).

[3] See also Russell R. Hula, "Stability Operations and Government: An Inherently Military Function," in *Short of General War: Perspectives on the Use of Military Power in the 21st Century*, ed. Harry R. Yarger (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, April 2010).

[4] An excellent firsthand account of our ill-considered and poorly executed stability efforts can be found in Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

[5] As cited in Roger S. Marin, "Finding an Exit: Delineating Battle Handoff in Phase IV," in *Short of General War*, 234.

[6] Ibid.

[7] For starters, read Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

[8] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 375.

[9] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999).

[10] Peng Guangquin and Yao Youzhi, eds., *Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005).

[11] Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008)