Out from the House of War:
A Litmus for New Leadership in Security Policy

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When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is to stop digging
– Will Rogers

Today I would like to elaborate on three points:

■ First, US security policy is deeply troubled – for a decade and more, it has been providing less and less security at increasing cost.

■ Second, the problem in our policy has a source or cause: we've come to rely too heavily on the exercise of military power in ways that have proved inefficient, inexpedient, and counter-productive.

■ Third, we should not mistake the cause of the problem for the solution – that is: the broader exercise of our military power will not rectify our present security dilemma.

The real surge

We can appreciate the scale of the problem if we take an accounting of "the surge." Here, I am not referring to the troop surge in Iraq, but rather to "the mother of all surges." That is: the surge in overall American global military effort that began in earnest ten years ago.

Since 1998, US defense spending has risen by 100 percent in real terms – 75 percent of that occurring after 911.   By the end of 2008, the United States will be spending more than $700 billion per year on its armed forces – more than 50 percent of total world military spending. In real terms, we have not spent as much on defense in any year since 1946.   Nor has our portion of global spending ever been so high. During the Cold War it was about half the present level.

We have also surged troops worldwide. All told, there are more than 400,000 US troops presently abroad – a number nearly as great as during the later Cold War period, and almost twice as many as in 1997.   Of the troops we have abroad, almost a quarter of a million are conducting contingency operations. Most of these are in or around Iraq and Afghanistan. On

those two wars, we have spent more than \$600 billion and invested more than 1.2 million personnel-years of effort. And we've sacrificed the lives of more than 4,500 Americans.

Taking account of costs and benefits

The outcome of this surge of money and activity is not encouraging: unintended and unanticipated consequences have predominated.   What we have demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan is that the most powerful nation on earth, unobstructed by a peer rival, commanding 22 percent of the world product, and consuming 50 percent of all defense spending cannot – in six years – bring a modicum of stability to two countries containing just 1 percent of the world's population.

Rather than spreading democracy, our recent activism has helped spread chaos in several regions. It has tattered both our reputation and our armed forces. It has helped push Muslim populations toward Islamist politics, unsettled America's alliances, and prompted "balancing behavior" on the part of potential big power competitors: China and Russia.

As for terrorism: it's grown worse, not better since 911. Average levels of terrorist violence that would have been considered extreme in the period prior to 9/11 have become the norm in the years since.

Unwelcome lessons

These outcomes might and should teach us something useful about the limits on the utility of military power. Back in April 2003, flush with the illusion of victory, President Bush had asserted that:

> By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technologies, we are redefining war on our terms. In this new era of warfare, we can target a regime, not a nation.

This is the "new warfare hypothesis" and it did not originate with President Bush. It has helped shape US thinking about the utility of force since the 1990-1991 Gulf War. We can now conclude that, in key respects, it is simply wrong. Well, to be fair to the President, we *can* target whatever we like. But when we "target a regime" with the aim of compelling significant transformation, we will -- in fact – hit a nation and its people. And no measure of precision will alter this.

What our recent practice shows is that:

- Military power is less discrete, manageable, and predictable in its effects than our policy assumes; and that,

■ Its negative effects are more far-reaching, costly, and complex than imagined in the new warfare paradigm.

Indeed, our Iraq misadventure offers an exceptional lesson in how "precision warfare" can spawn chaos, bringing with it a protracted surge in human suffering.

Several times, in Iraq and elsewhere, we have demonstrated an unmatched capacity to shatter conventional military forces. And we have shown ourselves able to disrupt or disable the material and institutional infrastructure of entire countries. However, we are stymied when it comes to containing and controlling the broad societal repercussions of infrastructure attacks. Our power also has proved inadequate when it comes to the pursuit of more ambitious and positive ends – like compelling social and political transformation. Putting "boots on the ground" in Iraq was supposed to give us greater control over outcomes. Instead, military occupation prompted a strong nationalistic response and it inflamed communal tensions.

The present policy quagmire

We should hope that our misadventure in Iraq might prompt a sea change in policy. But then, we have not yet managed to put Iraq behind us. Not nearly.

The national debate on the war has been too easily befuddled by the so-called "surge" – a set of initiatives that "succeed" by reinforcing the communal divisions that plague Iraq. General Petraeus' "surge" offers no hope of a stable resolution in Iraq and lights no light at the end of the tunnel. It offers only more tunnel. We can be grateful to the General for saying as much before the Senate on 8 April 2008: "[W]e haven't turned any corners, we haven't seen any lights at the end of the tunnel."

And so, having granted the Bush administration another 14 months in Iraq, during which it sacrificed another 1000 American lives, in the hope of significantly advancing reconciliation in Iraq, and having seen this hope evaporate like several before it, do we finally decide to set a different course and put this misadventure behind us? No – we remain on the course of protracted military involvement. This implies tens of thousands of US troops on Iraqi soil for an indefinite period. And no leading presidential candidate actually promises to do otherwise. None, including Senator Obama.

The Obama plan foresees withdrawing most combat units over 16 months – a period that presumably would end on the seventh anniversary of President Bush's initial declaration of "mission accomplished". But the troops left behind to do a variety of tasks, including some combat tasks, could easily number 60,000. Moreover, as Obama's advisors suggest, even partial withdrawal is contingent on developments on the ground – much like earlier plans to begin withdrawal once we turn some ever-receding corner.

Well, why shouldn't we give Operation Iraqi Freedom one more chance? Because the problem with the operation is the mission itself, which from the start has been overly ambitious,

intrusive, and provocative to Iraqis. In assessing our prospects there, two realities should be foremost in our minds:

> *First*, none of the powerful Iraqi groups or leaders with whom we are currently allied share the American vision or purpose – not even the Kurds. Our alliances are alliances of convenience; and,

> *Second,* significant majorities of Iraqis in both Sunni and Shia areas – which is where we are deployed – want us out within a year and support attacks on coalition troops.

But the official discussion on Iraq – the discussion among candidates and within Congress – seems almost entirely immune to these realities. Rather than seriously considering that our goals may be impractical and our tools inappropriate, the discussion focuses on problems of planning or execution or resource allocation.

In other areas, too, the discussion of security policy options seems constrained and unreflective:

For instance, it is disconcerting to hear strong bipartisan support for increasing the size of America's military. Yes, it's clear from Iraq, that we don't have enough ground troops to comfortably do the type of thing we should not be doing in the first place – which hardly seems a good reason to add more.   But then, some see us emerging from Iraq with a renewed, rather than diminished, passion for armed nation-building.

Another troubling occlusion in our national debate is the failure of any candidate to reference the public's growing sense that we are spending "too much" on defense. Recent Gallup polls show that the balance of opinion on defense spending now resembles that prevailing in 1993, just prior to the Clinton round of reductions.

So, we are rather stuck – not simply stuck in Iraq and Afghanistan, but stuck in a dysfunctional "policy box" – a range of options and assumptions that seem immune to falsification and reform. Must we continue to frame our security policy in terms of a permanent and unbounded "war on terrorism" – a piece of strategic nonsense if ever there was one? Must we withdraw troops from Iraq simply so we can surge them into somewhere else?   This is what I mean when I say we are mistaking the cause of our policy dilemma for the solution. It almost seems as though we cannot imagine that there *is* an "outside" to the box we're in.

In all likelihood, the problems that beset our security policy will outlast the tenure of President Bush. We can begin to understand why by recognizing that the problems also preceded him.

The changing role of military power

By the late-1990s, defense budgets were already rising after a nine-year respite – but with little relationship to actual threats. America's world reputation was already eroding. Key precursors

to current policy - unilateralism, offensive counter-proliferation, the "rogue state doctrine", and regime change - were already evident in US policy toward Iraq and elsewhere.

Also evident across the entire post-Cold War period is a more fundamental trend. Since the Cold War's end, three successive US administrations have lowered the threshold on the use of American military power.

- The threshold for using force has steadily come down,
- The ways we imagine using force and our armed forces have multiplied,
- And our military objectives have grown steadily more ambitious

Beyond the traditional objectives of deterring and defending against aggression, there has been an increasing emphasis on trying to use force and coercion to actually "prevent the emergence" of threats and, more generally, to "shape the strategic environment" (as the 1997 US *Quadrennial Defense Review* put it.)

The problem with so-called "preventive" uses and displays of military power – including saber rattling – is that these can exacerbate tensions and precipitate the outcome that they are meant to preclude. Thus, in addressing the nuclear programs of both North Korea and Iran, our coercive efforts have spurred, rather than retarded, the behavior we had hoped to stop. Similarly, as our military base and alliance structures roll-up to the borders of China and Russia, they seek to counter-balance. In this way, our policy helps feed a process of global repolarization and remilitarization.

In the past, threat prevention and "environment shaping" were largely in the purview of the State Department. But a feature of our post-Cold War practice has been the increasing intrusion of the Pentagon on the provinces of State. Parallel to this, diplomatic functions have been increasingly militarized. Thus, today, coercive diplomacy plays a bigger role relative to traditional "give-and-take" diplomacy. Similarly, "offensive counter-proliferation" – that is, arms control by means of bombardment – has grown in importance relative to non-proliferation efforts. Even US programs in support of democratization and development have gained a khaki tint.

Factors and conditions constraining policy

During the Cold War, the enormity of the American military establishment was unsurprising due to what Edward Luttwak called the "greater enormity" represented by the Soviet military. Traditional military power was pivotal to the competition between the two blocs, which grew out of the Second World War. Of course, with the collapse of Soviet power, the world changed – but the United States, less so. By the eve of the 9/11 attacks, America's share of global military spending stood at near 40 percent – up from 28 percent at the end of the 1980s. US spending relative to the set of potential threat and competitor states – Russia, China, and the "Axis of Evil" – had grown from less than 70 percent of the threat total in 1986 to approximately 200

percent in 2000. Similarly, the number and variety of US military involvements abroad rose sharply in the 1990s (relative to the period 1976-1989).

Then came 9/11. That the United States should respond vigorously to the attacks is not surprising. But the attacks themselves did not determine the *character* of our response, which was another surge in military spending and activity, including two wars and occupations. Nor does it follow from the experience of 9/11 that we would today – nearly seven years later – soft-pedal the lessons of our post-9/11 military activism, especially given its astounding costs and poor returns.

There are several factors or conditions that delimit our policy choices and our sense of what is possible, however. And these help hold us in a policy orbit centered on military power, centered on the Pentagon – the house of war. The first of these is long-standing; the second traces back to the Second World War; the third, originates with the end of the Cold War. So, in order:

First, America's global engagement has always been framed as a matter of "defending forward". And this suits a nation with deep-seated "exceptionalist" and "isolationist" sentiments. So does a preference for emphasizing "decisive" (that is, military) means – because these seem to promise quick, clear outcomes. You might say that our proclivity for militarized globalism is actually a mutated form of isolationism.

Surges in American globalism also have been war-driven – in 1917, 1941, and 1950 – with peacetime engagement thereafter almost continuously framed in terms of the Cold War, a prewar condition. Today, of course, there is the "war on terror" or the "long war" or "World War IV" (as some insist). During the Clinton administration there was no overarching "war theme", and this proved troublesome to the administration's plans. Nonetheless, there was evident the tendency to frame engagement in terms of security requirements.

The *second* conditioning factor is institutional, and it involves the unusual political heft of the Pentagon – that is, the Pentagon's domestic "soft power".

America's armed forces are a set of interlocking bureaucracies, and they do what bureaucracies do. They tend to see and represent the world in terms of their own defining functions – a hammer that sees all the world's problems as nails. They also jealously guard their function, their identity. Importantly, the US military sees itself and reproduces itself as a warfighting institution – not a "peacekeeping" one. I mean, it is adapted to combat operations, not peace operations. And it prefers traditional warfighting over counter-insurgency – although the latter, unlike peace operations, does have the benefit of being a form of war.

Bureaucracies also tend toward "expanded reproduction" – that is: they seek to grow, consuming more resources, appending new roles, and extending the scope of their authority – while also trying to conserve their core structure. All bureaucracies do this. It's the job of political authorities to discipline them.

What is unusual in the American case is that our armed forces are the best regarded and best resourced of the nation's institutions. About half of all federal employees work for DOD and the services. Thousands are employed full-time communicating DOD and service perspectives to various constituencies. This includes a network of policy centers and contracted think tanks whose aggregate capabilities far surpass those outside the military sphere.

An important political constituency is the 10 million voters who live in households with at least one person who is in the military, employed by DOD, or employed by a defense contractor. Millions more live in cities and towns heavily dependent on DOD activity. And there are about 25 million veterans in the United States.

Generally speaking, American politicians know better than to "run against the Pentagon". But just as important is the Pentagon's unmatched capacity to broadly convey its view of our security environment and security requirements. There is nothing inherently wrong in this. We expect and should expect our military leaders to tell it like they see it. What is dysfunctional is the imbalance in our policy analysis and policy-making system. But this is a product of history. History and inertia – the effluent of the Second World War and the Cold War.

The *third* delimiting condition reflects a strategic calculation and a political accommodation among US national leadership

Since the end of the Cold War, much of the US strategic community has been mesmerized by the advent of US primacy. As Richard Haass, the current president of the Council on Foreign Relations, put it: "The fundamental question that confronts American foreign policy is what to do with a surplus of power and the many and considerable advantages this surplus confers." To many, this circumstance seemed to provide the leverage with which the United States might further enhance its security, extend its position of world leadership, and advance an American vision of world order - a "new rule set".

The exercise of primacy does not necessarily entail military activism. We also have "soft power." But, as "soft power" advocate Joseph Nye (and others) have observed: it is only in the military dimension that the world can be said to be unipolar. Moreover: military power is the policy instrument we have in greatest supply. The US national defense budget is 15 times as large as the nation's budget for international affairs. And Defense commands 200 times as many people as State.

So one is easily tempted to ask, as former Secretary of State Madeline Albright reportedly did in a conversation with General Colin Powell: "What's the point of having this superb military, if we can't use it?"

As I recounted earlier: throughout the 1990s, we set to work rethinking how we might use our military power in new circumstances. But a political consensus on military activism eluded the Clinton administration, which was impeded by both a conservative Congress and the Pentagon. Its formation required two more things: a war time circumstance, which commenced on 9/11 2001, and a warfighting policy frame – now provided by the "war on terrorism". This allows

the definition of a clear-cut global enemy and holds out the prospect of bold and decisive action – just as we prefer. Within this framework, all sorts of things might be attempted and might pass muster in Congress as well.

So the "war on terrorism" today defines a politically practicable path for global activism. The price is this: it has locked our security policy into a set of practices that are inefficient, inexpedient, and counter-productive.

Conclusion: alter the climate of public opinion

Can we break out of the policy box in which we are presently stuck? Clearly, the next 30 months are very important – a period of transition. During this period, a new administration will move to reformulate America's security policy, and this provides an opportunity for renewed public debate. The constraining factors or conditions that I've cited are well-anchored and not easily dislodged. But we enter the coming period of policy transition with the harsh experience of Iraq still fresh. So what can we do? As educators and journalists, analysts and advocates, community leaders and informed citizens, we can work to alter the broader climate of opinion in which politicians act and seek office. Minimally, let us insist that the coming policy debate respond substantively to three propositions:

> *First,* our security policy is deeply troubled: it has been providing less and less security at increasing cost.

> *Second,* one cause or source is that we've come to rely too heavily on the exercise of military power in ways that are inefficient, inexpedient, and counter-productive.

> *Third,* we should not mistake the cause of the problem for the solution – that is: it is time to roll back and not simply refigure our dependence on military power as the leading edge of US global engagement.

These propositions can serve as a litmus for positive leadership in rethinking and revising our security policy.

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