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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

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In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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Fewer Missions, Not More Troops

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A bipartisan consensus wants to expand the American ground forces. But the expansion serves a failed strategy that relies on military occupations and state-building to fight terrorism. A better strategy is to avoid these missions and the troop expansion.

Under pressure from army generals and Democratic senators like Carl Levin and Jack Reed, President Bush last January proposed adding 27,000 marines and 65,000 soldiers to our military personnel over five years. The proposal would boost the army from 482,400 to 547,000 and create six new brigade combat teams, for a total of 48. The Marine Corps will expand from 175,000 to 202,000 and add several battalions to existing regiments.¹ An additional 9,200 troops will be added to the 555,000 troops in Army Reserve and National Guard.

The editorial pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* back the plan. So do John McCain, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Bill Richardson. Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani support an even larger expansion.² The draft defense authorization bill for fiscal year 2008 contains initial funding for the plan. Given bipartisan support, these funds will likely be part of the bill that the president signs into law later this year.

There are several problems with expanding the ground forces. First, it will impose enormous cost on taxpayers. Second, by the time the new troops are ready to deploy, the military should be relieved of its primary burden—Iraq. Once that happens, the United States will have enough ground forces to prosecute the war in Afghanistan, if it continues, while defending its allies in the Middle East and Asia. All we would lack is enough troops to occupy a large country that would prefer otherwise.

The justification for the new troops must then be to fight more wars of occupation. That is the principal problem with the plan. Its advocates ignore the lesson of Iraq, one U.S. leaders long understood but recently forgot: running other countries uninvited is a job the U.S. should avoid. Counter-terrorism does not require counter-insurgency and state-building. These missions are prone to failure, expensive, and a source of anti-American sentiment.

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New Troops: Expensive and Irrelevant to Iraq

The troops will be expensive: from 2007-2013, they will cost \$108 billion more than what would otherwise be spent.³ They will cost roughly \$15 billion annually thereafter.⁴ The initial costs buy new infrastructure, sign-up bonuses and training. The recurring costs are salary, benefits and the operations and maintenance of the new units.

That is not all. As long as the army continues to experience recruiting difficulties, expansion requires lowering induction standards. Quantity degrades quality. And because the four services' shares of the defense budget have been nearly fixed relative to each other since the Kennedy administration, it may prove politically difficult to expand the army without increasing the defense budget for the other services.

The new troops will not help Iraq. The time needed to train and recruit the new personnel means that the effort will not be complete until 2012 and none of the troops will be available before 2009.

If not Iraq, what are the new troops for? The army, including its Reserve and National Guard, and Marine Corps include about 1.2 million troops. About 500,000 are combat troops. Even if the United States still has 25,000 troops in Afghanistan in five years, and a similar amount preparing to rotate there, plus 75,000 troops stationed in Europe and Asia, we would have ample forces to defend against the unlikely prospect of Iranian or North Korean aggression. Those states' militaries together cost less than \$7 billion annually. Aggression by either would provoke local rivals of equal or greater strength. Russia is troubling, but the days of worrying that it would overrun Europe are gone. The European Union, with a GDP larger than America's, can defend itself in any case. Whatever one fears about China and Taiwan, there is nowhere for an army to fight over the Taiwan straits.

The Failed States Bugaboo

Aside from political positioning, two linked myths drive the push to expand the ground forces. The first is that the United States can master the art of quelling civil wars and rebuilding failed states. The second is that our security demands that we should.

The conventional wisdom goes like this: terrorists organize and train in places where government authority is limited, like the Taliban's Afghanistan. These failed states also spawn civil wars and humanitarian disasters that offend our consciences and threaten to create regional unrest, as we see in Iraq, Sudan or Somalia. To prevent these outcomes, the U.S. needs the ability to prop up authority abroad or to resurrect it from chaos. That requires boots on ground. Military forces alone cannot repair states, this thinking goes, but the security they provide allows civilians to do so. Defense analysts even use past occupations to tell us how many troops are needed to preserve order—at least twenty for every 1,000 citizens, or one per every 50.⁵

Afghanistan and Iraq show that occupying large states even at lower ratios can strain our military. With the "surge," the U.S. has 160,000 troops and the British 5,500 in Iraq. That's about one American or British soldier for every 130 Iraqis, excluding Kurds. In Afghanistan, the United States now provides 25,000 of the 48,500 foreign troops in the country. In a nation of 32 million, that is only one soldier for 660 Afghans. To maintain even these low force levels, the U.S. military has resorted to extending stays, relying heavily on less proficient National Guard units, and shortening the time units have at home.

The solution to maintaining high force levels in both countries is often said to be native forces, but experience shows that training them is challenging at best. Allies help, but even where they agree with the mission, they cannot keep large armies in the field. The supposed lesson is that the military burden of state-building falls to the United States, and it has too few troops to do the job.

This logic conflates counter-terrorism and state-building, burdening a task the United States can master with one we cannot. Counter-terrorism is best accomplished by police, intelligence operatives and special operations forces. The problems that leave states in need of building, on the other hand, are often beyond the power of outsiders to repair, no matter how many troops they send or how many wells they dig.

Failed states are political problems at bottom, problems that are solved by adroit use of power, not force ratios. Occupiers far from home, unfamiliar with the local customs, language, and political structure, are unlikely to govern skillfully. That is why the track record of foreign powers pacifying insurgencies in recent decades is abysmal.⁶

In Iraq, conventional wisdom says more troops might have saved the country from its present state; more U.S. troops in spring and summer 2003 would have prevented the looting and power vacuums that encouraged the formation of ethnic militias. These developments, this thinking goes, angered Iraqis into revolt and undermined the state, allowing the Sunni insurgency to flourish.⁷

This theory that disorder caused the insurgency could be right. Based on that possibility, it is fair to conclude that the United States should have sent more troops to Iraq—and we had plenty available for a short stay. But a more plausible theory blames a disagreement between Iraq's groups about the distribution of power. The absence of a political consensus made violence likely, however many Americans policed Iraq. Additionally, a larger American presence might have further enraged Iraqi nationalism, bringing swifter and more intense insurrection—including among the Shiites, whose militants we pacified, however temporarily, more by appeasement than force.

Afghanistan shows that less can be more. Rhetoric notwithstanding, U.S. policy there has been to avoid a large state-building mission. The military presence is miniscule compared with Iraq's, but more successful, despite the lack of effective governance from the capital.

Luckily for us, disorder abroad is generally inconsequential to our security. History is full of failed states, and only Afghanistan, by harboring al Qaeda, created serious problems for U.S. security. Certain civil wars have spurred jihadism, but it does not follow that the United States should enter these conflicts, even in the Middle East.

Civil war and disorder have plagued civilization since its inception. The notion that fighting terrorism requires the elimination of those problems leads to an imperial solution far more costly than the problem it is meant to solve. Beyond the cost in blood and treasure, this strategy serves jihadi propaganda, slowing its defeat by more moderate ideologies.

Counter-insurgency and state-building are skills America does not need. That helps explain why we are bad at them. Americans historically looked askance at the small wars European powers fought to maintain their imperial holdings, viewing these actions as illiberal and wrong. Misadventures like Vietnam are the exceptions that make the rule. It is no accident that U.S. national security organizations are not designed for occupation duties. We are our own worst enemy in this regard, and that is a sign of our lingering common sense.

Rediscovering Restraint

Today many military analysts complain that there are not enough civilians willing to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq, and propose a cadre of rapidly deployable bureaucrats to serve such missions.⁸ But this “problem” reflects the fact that the United States employs

diplomats to relate to foreign states, not a colonial service to run them. Likewise, many pundits lament the demise of counter-insurgency expertise in the U.S. military after Vietnam and caution against a post-Iraq repetition of the Vietnam syndrome that precipitated it. But the military's organizational distaste for these missions, manifest in rotation schedules, training, and weapons procurement, reflects a national preference.

Organizations usually respond gradually to outside pressure. Today's calls for an occupational army have less effect than decades of budget allocations that prioritize conventional war, ideas like the Weinberger-Powell doctrine, which served in the 1980s to prevent counter-insurgencies, and rhetoric like that expressed before 2001 by George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice, when they were against nation-building.⁹ The problem with our foreign policy is not the national reluctance to take on colonial duties. The problem is the decline of this reluctance, especially after September 11.

The implicit position of many American foreign-policy experts and the candidates they inform is that fighting terrorism requires changing our military from one meant to fight defensive wars to one meant to fight offensive wars of occupation. Expanding the army is part of this shift. But more troops encourage the American conceit that foreign countries are ours to remake by force. These missions embroil us in tragedies we cannot fix, draining our resources and creating enemies. The best way to serve our security is to stop fighting other people's civil wars.

If it is a war, counter-terrorism is less a “Long War” than a quiet one. It is accomplished by allies we aid, policemen making phone calls, meetings with foreign spymasters, and the occasional covert use or threat of force. We need not run states to make them inhospitable to jihadists. Liberal values sell themselves, especially when they are not introduced at gunpoint or during a lecture on how to run your country. What the nation needs is not more troops, but more restraint in using them.

article footnotes

¹ The increase is measured by the difference from the amount recommended by the Defense Department in its Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), not the actual amount of troops in uniform. Since supplemental appropriations passed in recent years to fund the wars allow the army and marines to maintain forces over end-strength by about 30,000 troops, one could say that the increase is really closer to 60,000. The FY 2007 defense authorization bill, passed prior to the president's plan, allowed troop levels above the QDR figures, meaning the expansion is technically underway already. Another facet of the plan shifts additional troops from administrative to combat duties.

² For a rare example of opposition to the expansion, see Gordon Adams, “The Problem with Expanding the U.S. Military,” *The Bulletin Online*, May 1, 2007, www.thebulletin.org/columns/gordon-adams/20070501.html.

³ “Estimated Cost of the Administration's Proposal to Increase the Army's and the Marine Corps's Personnel Levels,” Congressional Budget Office, April 16, 2007, www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/80xx/doc8004/04-16-MilitaryEndStrength.pdf. At \$21 billion annually, the new cost would add 3.3 percent to the defense budget of \$624 billion, including the wars. Defense spending now accounts for nearly a quarter of U.S. government spending, and over half of discretionary spending.

⁴ The \$15 billion figure is my estimate using the CBO data.

⁵ James Quinlivan, “Force Requirements in Stability Operations,” *Parameters*, Vol 25, No. 4 (Winter 1995), pp. 59-69.

⁶ Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press: 2003); Jeffrey Record, *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2007).

⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis of the Reconstruction,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (December 2006), pp. 1-20.

⁸ Clark Murdock and Michele Flournoy et al, *Beyond Goldwater Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2005).

⁹ Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs*, (January/February 2000).



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