



Kill the QDR

(Published in the [*American Enterprise Institute*](#), *Armed Forces Journal*, February 1, 2006)

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Colaboraciones n° 799

February 13, 2006

Doctor: "Where does it hurt?"

Patient: "It only hurts when I do this."

Doctor: "So, stop doing that."

It's an old joke, but sound medical advice, particularly for our present patient, the Pentagon. It's time to "stop doing that" -- "that" being the Quadrennial Defense Review.

After four attempts (if you include the 1993 "Bottom-Up Review," or BUR), it is fair to conclude that the process has outlived its utility. It's not that the 2005 QDR is so awful; it hasn't been officially released, but its basic conclusions are common knowledge. But the Pentagon has more or less been in "QDR mode" for more than a decade; the services

maintain semi-permanent QDR offices where activity peaks every four years but never ceases. It's time to call an end to an exercise that isn't producing the desired result.

The original idea was a good one. As the Soviet empire collapsed, it became apparent that the Cold War strategy of containment and its force-sizing and force-shaping constructs had been overtaken by events. There was no superpower doppelganger for the United States, confronting us in every remote corner of the planet. Deprived of the Russian yardstick, U.S. military forces did not have an obvious way of measuring how big they needed to be. For the first Bush administration this was a serious problem. In the eye of the public and press, our

last Cold War president seemed a bit of an anachronism.

Oddly, the stunning success in Operation Desert Storm only fueled the desire for a "peace dividend;" U.S. armed forces seemed so dominant that they could patrol the planet single-handedly.

And so then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney directed an internal study which produced the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance. In many ways, each QDR has been a footnote to the basic policy elaborated in that report: the U.S. military should secure American global pre-eminence, try to deter the rise of a superpower challenger, and shape the international security order in ways conducive to American principles and interests. Leaked to the press before being formally approved, the DPG was castigated as the work of unreconstructed Cold Warriors looking for any excuse to keep defense spending up.

While the planning guidance officially was buried with the nuclear waste, it did provide the basis for a force-planning exercise dubbed the "Base Force." That was an attempt to define a minimum level of military power that would signal to the rest of the world that, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell put it, a "superpower lives here." Be careful before you cross the United States.

Strategic fashions have come and gone over the course of the QDRs. The 1993 report of the BUR was the brainchild of Defense Secretary Les

Aspin, a former McNamara "whiz kid" who had distinguished himself as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and been tapped by new President Bill Clinton to lead the Pentagon. The BUR set forth the metric that U.S. forces needed to be able to fight two "nearly simultaneous major theater wars," or MTWs, a kind of "lite" formulation of the two-big-war standard of the Cold War; major theater wars defined as the kind of quick and crushing victory over the Iraqis in 1991. The most attractive part of the idea was that it justified significant defense spending reductions and force cuts.

Yet, almost immediately, the two-theater-war benchmark became not a wind of change but a force defending the status quo. The first Clinton term produced little likelihood of a conventional conflict -- the 1994 North Korean scare revealed that a war on the peninsula would be anything but a Desert Storm replay -- rather a plethora of smaller but more ambiguous operations. These "peacekeeping" operations or "tea-cup wars" may have been smaller, but they were nightmarishly complex. The "Black Hawk Down" incident in Somalia and a botched intervention in Haiti cost Secretary Aspin his job. The subsequent paralysis in the face of the Rwandan genocide and the escalating fighting in the Balkans made the demands of "contingency" operations a central concern.

But the deeply entrenched commitment to conventional-style theater wars halted the attempt to quantify the demands of smaller wars in the

usual force-planning way. "MTWs" became "MRCs" -- major regional contingencies -- but the 1997 QDR offered little beyond the name change. The 1997 review also introduced the idea of a "revolution in military affairs," the Clinton administration's version of "transformation," but in practice that meant buying a few extra precision-guided weapons at the expense of aircraft and other "platform" programs. As in 1993, the Army staved off deeper manpower reductions.

The banner of transformation flew high above the 2001 QDR -- candidate George W. Bush had made a lot of this idea on the campaign trail and hired Donald Rumsfeld for the job of secretary for transformation. Transformation appealed to the "cheap hawk" sentiments of the modern Republican Party, increasingly driven by the impulses of the Gingrich Revolution of the mid-1990s. This was not Ronald Reagan's Republican Party, willing to spend the Soviet Union into the dustbin of history.

Unfortunately, the 2001 QDR was delayed, and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, raised doubts about the wisdom of Rummy-style transformation.

Once again, a QDR was overtaken by events; these massive reviews were reactionary rather than revolutionary.

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and subsequent counterinsurgency campaigns, to say nothing of the ultimate "long, hard slog" to se-

cure political transformation of the greater Middle East, made the idea of "rapid, decisive operations" look shallow, indeed.

And so heading into the 2005 QDR, the Pentagon found itself with an irresolvable dilemma. The goal of American pre-eminence endured -- indeed President Bush's 2002 national security strategy had strengthened the commitment -- but the hopes for preserving Pax Americana on the cheap, the hopes of every U.S. administration since the end of the Cold War had been shattered by new strategic realities. Not only was there the matter of the Middle East, but China's rising military had learned the lessons of the revolution in military affairs to create new power-projection capabilities that put U.S. forces at risk in the event of a crisis or conflict. And there was the even-more-difficult challenge of what to do about the spread of nuclear weapons to unstable and rogue-type regimes such as Iran.

In sum, we've reached the limit of our ability to think our way out of our military dilemma. It's time to stop thinking and start spending. Only a larger and more capable force -- a more expensive force -- can give us the strategic options we so desperately need.

Show me the money

In retrospect, the notion that the U.S. could long retain its position of leadership while spending just 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on its military was optimistic, to put it kindly. Even allowing for

the strong appeal of American ideals of individual liberty, the likelihood of the post-Cold-War lions lying down with the lambs contravenes the entirety of human history.

The real measure of our interest in preserving the Pax Americana is what we're willing to pay for it; people in uniform are making the ultimate sacrifice abroad, but people at home seem less willing to make a more modest financial sacrifice at home.

Even the baseline budgets of the Bush administration have added no more than half a percentage point to the share of American wealth devoted to defense; the "emergency" supplemental costs of Iraq and Afghanistan -- 4½ years after Sept. 11 - - bump the slice up to just over 4 percent. By comparison, George Bush Senior spent 4.8 percent of GDP on defense in his final year in office; the Cold War average was between 6 and 7 percent, including the Reagan buildup.

Thus, no matter how perceptive the Pentagon's strategy-makers turn out to be, their plan will suffer from a shortfall of resources, just as the preceding plans have. The dichotomy between policy and resources, between strategic ends and military means, is nowhere more apparent than in the Middle East; President Bush has advanced a bold "forward strategy of freedom," appealing to the deepest of American political ideals, and he repeatedly has shown his own deep commitment to make the ideal real. But in the process, he has neglected the military institutions upon which his strategy is ba-

sed. The combination of the Bush Doctrine and Clinton-era budgets is a recipe for disaster, redeemed so far mostly by the quality of the force.

But the failure to reinvest in defense needs will eventually catch up with us. The shortages go across the board. Procurement of new weaponry was more than halved from a peak in 1985 of more than \$106 billion -- in 2003, inflation-adjusted prices -- to just over \$50 billion during the years of the second Clinton Administration, the infamous "procurement holiday." Again, this administration has restored less than \$20 billion per year of that figure; it is no wonder that equipment readiness rates are flagging as fleets of all kinds age. Nor is it any wonder that the defense industry may be set for another round of consolidation.

Although research and development spending didn't dip as much and has been largely restored, the procurement bottleneck means that new technologies don't make it to the field as fast as they should.

Personnel and operations and maintenance spending have followed a weird trajectory all their own. The bottom line is that a smaller active-duty force is doing more with less, and the reserve components -- particularly the National Guard -- have been employed not as a true strategic reserve but as an operational reserve, constantly called up to supplement an overstretched active force. But though the tale of the budgetary numbers isn't as clear as it is with materiel, the fundamental problem is, if anything, more severe;

the force, particularly the ground force, is too small. And peacekeeping, peacemaking, counterinsurgency and other forms of irregular war are more manpower intensive than they are firepower intensive.

End it, don't mend it

In sum, the Quadrennial Defense Review process, from 1993 until now, has utterly failed to do what it was intended to do: provide a link among strategy, force-planning and defense budgeting. Indeed, with every QDR, the situation has gotten worse; the ends-means problem has grown.

Given that the Bush administration's 2007 budget request is highly unlikely to reverse this terrible trend -- how I hope I'm wrong! -- it would be far better to refrain from future defense reviewing, quadrennial or otherwise.

The process has become an exercise in fantasy, and what the Pentagon and the president need are a dose of reality. Let's be honest; let's tell the military: "OK, here's the amount of money we're willing to give you. Tell us what you think you can do with it and let's manage the risk."

I come to bury the QDR with not a little personal regret. When I worked for the staff of the House Armed Services Committee, I helped draft the enabling legislation

for the 1997 review. And Congress could play an important role in re-connecting our security strategy-making to our defense budget process. Committee Chairman Rep. Duncan Hunter has been preparing a "shadow QDR" through hearings last fall and to come this spring; perhaps he can reprise the role played by Les Aspin 15 years ago, bringing pressure on the administration from Capitol Hill.

However, I'm not optimistic about Mr. Hunter's prospects. Budgetary questions are always a matter of domestic politics, and the political climate in Washington these days -- the president's weaknesses combined with the collapse of the Republican machine in Congress and the inveterate hostility of the Democrats -- is not conducive to putting the national interest above partisan interest.

The one man who might solve the problem is President Bush himself, and he has continually surprised those who have underestimated him. But the president has squandered two golden opportunities to achieve a new consensus on defense spending, once when he was first elected and again in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

We can't wait another four years for another QDR.

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