

Supremacy by Stealth

It is a cliché these days to observe that the United States now possesses a global empire—different from Britain’s and Rome’s but an empire nonetheless. It is time to move beyond a statement of the obvious. Our recent effort in Iraq, with its large-scale mobilization of troops and immense concentration of risk, is not indicative of how we will want to act in the future.

So how should we operate on a tactical level to manage an unruly world? What are the rules and what are the tools?

by Robert D. Kaplan

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In the late winter of 2003, as the United States was dispatching tens of thousands of soldiers to the Middle East for an invasion of Iraq, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command was deployed in sixty-five countries. In Nepal the Special Forces were training government troops to hunt down the Maoist rebels who were terrorizing that nation. In the Philippines they were scheduled to increase in number for the fight against the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas. There was also Colombia—the third largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, after Israel and Egypt, and the third most populous country in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico. Jungly, disease-ridden, and chillingly violent, Colombia is the possessor of untapped oil reserves and is crucially important to American interests.

The totalitarian regimes in Iraq and North Korea, and the gargantuan difficulty of displacing them, may have been grabbing headlines of late, but the future of military conflict—and therefore of America’s global responsibilities over the coming decades—may best be gauged in Colombia, where guerrilla groups, both left-wing and right-wing, have downplayed ideology in favor of decentralized baronies and franchises built on terrorism, narcotrafficking, kidnapping, counterfeiting, and the siphoning of oil-pipeline revenues from local governments. FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), for example, is Karl Marx at the top and Adam Smith all the way down the command chain. Guerrilla warfare is now all about business, and physical cruelty knows no limits. It extends to torture (fish hooks to tear up the genitals), gang rape, and the murder of children whose parents do not cooperate with the insurgents. The Colombian rebels take in hundreds of millions of dollars annually from cocaine-related profits alone, and have documented links to the Irish Republican Army and the Basque separatists (who have apparently advised them on kidnapping and car-bomb tactics). If left unmolested, they will likely establish strategic links with al Qaeda.

Arauca province, a petroleum-rich area in northeastern Colombia, near the Venezuelan border, is a pool-table-flat lesion of broadleaf thickets, scrap-iron settlements, and gravy-brown rivers. The journey from the airfield to the Colombian army base, where a few dozen Green Berets and civil-affairs officers and their support staff are bunkered behind sandbags and concertina wire, is only several hundred yards. Yet U.S. personnel make the journey in full kit, inside armored cars and Humvees with mounted MK-19 40mm grenade launchers. As I stepped off the tarmac in late February, two Colombian soldiers, badly wounded by a car bomb set off by left-wing narcoterrorists (the bomb had been coated with human feces in hopes of causing infection), were being carried on stretchers to the base infirmary, where a Special Forces medic was

waiting to treat them. The day before, the Colombian police had managed to deactivate two other bombs in Arauca. The day before that there had been an assassination attempt on a local politician. And the day before that an electricity tower had been bombed, knocking out power in the region. Previous days had brought the usual roadside kidnappings, street-corner bicycle bombings, grenade strikes on police stations, and mortar attacks on Colombian soldiers—using propane cylinders packed with nails, broken glass, and feces.

As we drove through Arauca’s mangy streets in a Special Forces convoy, every car and bicycle seemed potentially deadly. Yet the U.S. troops there are defiant, if frustrated. The U.S. government permits them only to train, rather than fight alongside, their Colombian counterparts, but they want the rules of engagement loosened. After a truck unexpectedly pulled out into the street, slowing our convoy and causing us to scan rooftops and parked vehicles (and causing me to sweat more than usual in the humid and fetid atmosphere), a Green Beret with experience on several continents leaned over and said, “If five firemen get killed fighting a fire, what do you do? Let the building burn? I wish people in Washington would totally get Vietnam out of their system.”

Back at the base, Major Mike Oliver and Captain Carl Brosky, civil-affairs specialists who between them have served in the Balkans, Africa, and several Latin American countries, were spending the day chasing down two containers of equipment for Arauca’s schools and hospital that had been held up in customs at the Venezuelan border. A week earlier, at Tolomeida, several hundred miles south, I had watched Sergeant Ivan Castro, a Puerto Rican from Hoboken, New Jersey, as he patiently taught Colombian soldiers how to sit in a 360-degree “cigar formation” while on reconnaissance, in order to rest in the field without being surprised by the enemy. Later he taught them how to peel back in retreat, without a gap in fire, after making first contact with the enemy. Castro worked twelve hours in the heat that day, speaking in a steady, nurturing tone, working with each soldier until the whole unit performed the drills perfectly.

Even as America’s leaders deny that the United States has true imperial intentions, Colombia—still so remote from public consciousness—illustrates the imperial reality of America’s global situation. Colombia is only one of the far-flung places in which we have an active military presence. The historian Erich S. Gruen has observed that Rome’s expansion throughout the Mediterranean littoral may well have been motivated not by an appetite for conquest per se but because it was thought necessary for the security of the core homeland. The same is true for the United States worldwide, in an age of collapsed distances. This American imperium is without colonies, designed for a jet-and-information age in which mass movements of people and capital dilute the traditional meaning of sovereignty. Although we don’t establish ourselves permanently on the ground in many locations, as the British did, reliance on our military equipment and the training and maintenance that go along with it (for which the international arms bazaar is no substitute) helps to bind regimes to us nonetheless. Rather than the mass conscription army that fought World War II, we now have professional armed forces, which enjoy the soldiering life for its own sake: a defining attribute of an imperial military, as the historian Byron Farwell noted in *Mr. Kipling’s Army* (1981).

The Pentagon divides the earth into five theaters. For example, at the intersection of 5° latitude and 68° longitude, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, CENTCOM (the U.S. Central Command) gives way to PACOM (the Pacific Command). At the Turkish-Iranian border it gives way to EUCOM (the European

Command). By the 1990s the U.S. Air Force had a presence of some sort on six of the world's continents. Long before 9/11 the Special Forces were conducting thousands of operations a year in a total of nearly 170 countries, with an average of nine "quiet professionals" (as the Army calls them) on each mission. Since 9/11 the United States and its personnel have burrowed deep into foreign intelligence agencies, armies, and police units across the globe.

Precisely because they foment dynamic change, liberal empires—like those of Venice, Great Britain, and the United States—create the conditions for their own demise. Thus they must be especially devious. The very spread of the democracy for which we struggle weakens our grip on many heretofore docile governments: behold the stubborn refusal by Turkey and Mexico to go along with U.S. policy on Iraq. Consequently, if we are to get our way, and at the same time to promote our democratic principles, we will have to operate nimbly, in the shadows and behind closed doors, using means far less obvious than the august array of power displayed in the air and ground war against Iraq. "Don't bluster, don't threaten, but quietly and severely punish bad behavior," says Eliot Cohen, a military historian at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, in Washington. "It's the way the Romans acted." Not just the Romans, of course: "Speak softly and carry a big stick" was Theodore Roosevelt's way of putting it.

We can take nothing for granted. A hundred years ago the British Navy looked fairly invincible for all time. A world managed by the Chinese, by a Franco-German-dominated European Union aligned with Russia, or by the United Nations (an organization that worships peace and consensus, and will therefore sacrifice any principle for their sakes) would be infinitely worse than the world we have now. And so for the time being the highest morality must be the preservation—and, wherever prudent, the accretion—of American power.

The purpose of power is not power itself; it is the fundamentally liberal purpose of sustaining the key characteristics of an orderly world. Those characteristics include basic political stability; the idea of liberty, pragmatically conceived; respect for property; economic freedom; and representative government, culturally understood. At this moment in time it is American power, and American power only, that can serve as an organizing principle for the worldwide expansion of a liberal civil society. As I will argue below, the United States has acquired this responsibility at a dangerous and chaotic moment in world history. The old Cold War system, for half a century the reigning paradigm in international affairs, is obviously defunct. Enlarging the United Nations Security Council, as some suggest, would make it even harder for that body to achieve consensus on anything remotely substantive. Powers that may one day serve as stabilizing regional influences—India and Russia, China and the European Union—are themselves still unstable or unformed or unconfident or illiberal. Hundreds of new and expanding international institutions are beginning to function effectively worldwide, but they remain fragile. Two or three decades hence conditions may be propitious for the emergence of a new international system—one with many influential actors in a regime of organically evolving interdependence. But until that time arrives, it is largely the task of the United States to maintain a modicum of order and stability. We are an ephemeral imperial power, and if we are smart, we will recognize that basic fact.

The "American Empire" has been discussed ad nauseam of late, but practical ways of managing it have not. Even so, the management techniques are emerging. While realists and idealists argue "nation-building" and other general principles in Washington and New York seminars, young majors,

lieutenant colonels, and other middle-ranking officers are regularly making decisions in the field about how best to train Colombia's army, which Afghan tribal chiefs to support, what kind of coast guard and special forces the Yemeni government requires, how the Mongolians can preserve their sovereignty against Chinese and Russian infiltration, how to transform the Romanian military into a smaller service along flexible Western command lines, and so forth. The fact is that we trust these people on the ground to be keepers of our values and agents of our imperium, and to act without specific instructions. A rulebook that does not make sense to them is no rulebook at all.

The following rules represent a distillation of my own experience and conversations with diplomats and military officers I have met in recent travels on four continents, and on military bases around the United States.

#### **Rule No. 1**

##### ***Produce More Joppolos***

Then I asked Major Paul S. Warren, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, home of the Army's Special Operations Command, what serves as the model for a civil-affairs officer within the Special Operations forces, he said, "Read John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*—it's all there." The hero of Hersey's World War II novel is Army Major Victor Joppolo, an Italian-American civil-affairs officer appointed to govern the recently liberated Sicilian town of Adano. Joppolo is full of resourcefulness. He arranges for the U.S. Navy to show local fishermen which parts of the harbor are free of mines, so that they can use their boats to feed the town. He finds a bell from an old Navy destroyer to replace the one that the Fascists took from the local church and melted down for bullets. He countermands his own general's order outlawing the use of horse-drawn carts, which the town needs to transport food and water. He goes to the back of a line to buy bread, to show Adano's citizens that although he is in charge, he is their servant, not their master. He is the first ruler in the town's history who doesn't represent a brute force of nature. In Hersey's words, [Men like Joppolo are] *our future in the world. Neither the eloquence of Churchill nor the humanness of Roosevelt, no Charter, no four freedoms or fourteen points, no dreamer's diagram so symmetrical and so faultless on paper, no plan, no hope, no treaty—none of these things can guarantee anything. Only men can guarantee, only the behavior of men under pressure, only our Joppolos.*

One good man is worth a thousand wonks. As *The Times of India* wrote on July 7, 1893, the mind of a sharp political agent should not be "crowded with fusty learning." Ian Copland, a historian of the British Raj, wrote that "extroverts and sporting types, sensitive to the cultural milieu," were always necessary to win the confidence of local rulers. In Yemen recently I observed a retired Special Forces officer cementing friendships with local sheikhs and military men by handing out foot-long bowie knives as gifts. In a world of tribes and thugs manliness still goes a long way.

The right men or women, no matter how few, will find the right hinge in a given situation to change history. The Spartans turned the tide of battle in Sicily by dispatching only a small mission, headed by Gylippus. His arrival in 414 B.C. kept the Syracusans from surrendering to the Athenians. It broke the Athenian land blockade of Syracuse, rallied other Sicilian city-states to the cause, and was crucial to the defeat of the Athenian fleet the following year. The United States sent a similarly small mission to El Salvador in the 1980s: never more than fifty-five Special Forces trainers at one time. But that was enough to teach the Salvadoran military to confront more effectively the communist guerrillas while beginning to

transform itself from an ill-disciplined constabulary force into something much closer to a professional army.

"You produce a product and let him loose," explains Sidney Shachnow, a retired Army major general. "The Special Forces that dropped in to help [the Afghan warlord Abdul Rashid] Dostum, the guys who grew beards, got on horses, and dressed up like Afghans, were not ordered to do so by Tommy Franks. These were decisions they made in the field."

Shachnow himself is a perfect example of the kind of man he describes. Hard and chiseled, he calls to mind Ligustinus, a Roman centurion who spent nearly half his life in the Army—in Spain, Macedonia, and Greece—and was cited for bravery thirty-four times. Shachnow is a Holocaust survivor. Born in 1933, in Lithuania, he endured a Nazi concentration camp as a boy; emigrated to Salem, Massachusetts; joined the Army as a private out of high school; after reaching the rank of sergeant first class attended officers' training school; and served two combat tours in Vietnam, where he was wounded twice. He rose to be a two-star general and a guiding light of the Special Forces. His success resulted from decisions made on instinct and impulse, and from an ability to take advantage of cultural settings in which he did not naturally fit—exactly the ability that U.S. trainers and commandos in El Salvador, Afghanistan, and so many other places have had to possess.

"A Special Forces guy," Shachnow told me, "has to be a lethal killer one moment and a humanitarian the next. He has to know how to get strangers who speak another language to do things for him. He has to go from knowing enough Russian to knowing enough Arabic in a few weeks, depending on the deployment. We need people who are cultural quick studies." Shachnow was talking about a knack for dealing with people, almost a form of charisma. The right man will know how to behave in a given situation—will know how to find things out and act on them.

#### **Rule No. 2**

##### ***Stay on the Move***

Xenophon's Greek army cut through the Persian Empire in 401 B.C., with the troops freely debating each step. We should be mobile in the same way—get bogged down militarily nowhere, but make sure we have military access everywhere. Because we have to manage a world in which—as always—old regimes periodically crumble, disaster lies in becoming too deeply implanted in more than a handful of countries at once. Here our provincialism helps. As Hayward S. Florer, a retired Special Forces colonel, told me, "Even our Special Ops people are insular. Sure, we like the adventure with other cultures, learning the history and language. But at heart many of us are farm boys who can't wait to get home. In this way we're not like the British and French. Our insularity protects us from becoming colonials."

Colonialism is in part an outgrowth of cosmopolitanism, the intellectual craving to experience different cultures and locales; it leads, inexorably, to an intense personal involvement in their fate. "We want an empire not of colonies or protectorates but of personal relationships," a Marine lieutenant colonel at Camp Pendleton, in California, told me. "We back into deployments. There doesn't need to be a policy directive from the Pentagon—half the time we don't know what the policy is. We get a message from a Kenyan or Nigerian officer who studied here that his unit needs training. We try to do it. We help decide, based on our needs in a region, who we want to help out." The U.S. military is constantly doing favors for other militaries, favors we call in when we need to. This is how we sometimes get access to places. The formal base rights that we have in forty countries may in the future be less significant than the number of friendships maintained between

U.S. officers and their foreign counterparts. With that in mind, the military needs to establish a formal data system for tracking such relationships. At present the method of keeping abreast of these crucial ties is largely anecdotal.

The best tools of access are the so-called "iron majors," a term that really refers to all mid-level officers, from noncommissioned master sergeants and chief warrant officers to colonels. In a sense majors run our military establishment, regardless of who the Secretary of Defense happens to be. Up through the rank of captain an officer hasn't closed the door on other career options. But becoming a major means you've "bought into the corporation," explains Special Forces Major Roger D. Carstens. "We're the ones who are up at four A.M. answering the general's e-mails, making sure all the systems are go."

The United States has set up military missions throughout the formerly communist world, creating situations in which U.S. majors, lieutenant colonels, and full colonels are often advising foreign generals and chiefs of staff. Make no mistake: these officers are policymakers by another name. A Romanian-speaking expert on the Balkans, Army Lieutenant Colonel Charles van Bebber, has become well known in top military circles in Bucharest for helping to start the reform process that led to Romania's integration with NATO. Such small-scale but vital relationships give America an edge there over its Western European allies. One of the reasons that countries like Romania and Bulgaria supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq is that they now see their primary military relationship as being with America rather than with NATO as such.

In formerly communist Mongolia, U.S. Army Colonel Tom Wilhelm, a fluent speaker of Russian who studied at Leningrad State University, is an adviser to the local military. With Wilhelm's help, Mongolia has reoriented its defense strategy toward international peacekeeping—as a means of gaining allies in global forums against its rapacious neighbors, Russia and China. The planned dispatch of a Mongolian contingent to help patrol postwar Iraq was the result of what one good man—in this case, Wilhelm—was able to accomplish on the ground. I recently followed him around on an inspection tour of Mongolia's Gobi Desert border with China. We slept in local military outposts, rode Bactrian camels, and spent hours in conversation with mid-level Mongolian officers over meals of horsemeat and camel's milk. It is through such activities that relationships are built and allies are gained in an era when anyplace can turn out to be strategic.

#### **Rule No. 3**

##### ***Emulate Second-Century Rome***

Provincialism is the aspect of our national character that will keep the United States from overextending itself in too many causes. But owing to the wave of immigration from Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America that began in the 1970s, the United States is an international society comparable to Rome in the second century A.D., when the empire reached its territorial zenith under Trajan and, more important, was granting citizenship to elites in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. (Trajan and Hadrian, in fact, were both from Spain.) Our military, intelligence, and diplomatic communities must now turn to our Iranian-, Arab-, and other hyphenated Americans—our potential Joppolos. At a time when we desperately need more language specialists, it is shameful that we are seeking out so few of the many native speakers at our disposal. The financial incentives we offer them are simply insufficient, and the waiting period for security clearance has become farcically long. This situation has been changing of late for the better: it needs to continue to do so.

Trained area specialists are likewise indispensable. In 1976 Secretary of State Henry Kissinger entrusted the eminent Arabist and diplomat Talcott Seelye, in Lebanon, to carry out two discreet evacuations of American citizens from that war-torn country with the help of the Palestine Liberation Organization—which we did not recognize at the time. Seelye, who was born in Beirut, may not have wholly agreed with Kissinger’s foreign policy—but that didn’t matter. He knew how to get the job done. The fact that Arabists and other area specialists may be emotionally involved, through marriage or friendship, with host countries—often causing them to dislike the policies that Washington orders them to execute—can actually be of benefit, because it gives them credibility with like-minded locals. In any case, such tensions between policymakers and agents in the field are typical of imperial systems. We should not be overly concerned about them.

True, comparison is the beginning of all serious scholarship, and area experts are ignorant of much outside their favored patch of ground. Their knowledge of the current reality in a given country is so prodigious that they often cannot imagine a different reality. That is why area experts can say what is going on in a place, but cannot always say what it means. Still, it is impossible to implement any policy without them, as Kissinger and others learned.

Colonel Robert Warburton, the Anglo-Afghan who established the Khyber Rifles regiment on the Northwest Frontier of British India in 1879, was one kind of person needed to manage our interests in distant corners of the world. Warburton spoke fluent Pashto and Persian, and was at home among both aristocratic Englishmen and Afridi tribesmen. The normally cruel and perfidious Afridis held him in such high esteem that he did not need to go armed among them. Warburton was less a cosmopolitan than a nuts-and-bolts journeyman, whose linguistic skills came from birth and circumstance more than from intellectual curiosity. The American equivalents of Warburton can be found among Arab-Americans posted to Central Command and Latino-Americans posted to Southern Command—people who fit into places like Yemen and Colombia, but who want only to return to their suburban American homes afterward.

Southern Command, in particular, is full of Spanish-speaking noncommissioned officers: ethnic Mexicans, Dominicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans. The relative shortage of speakers of Arabic and other languages in the rest of the military indicates that in the Special Forces, at least, languages may soon have to be recognized as an “occupational skill”—like weaponry, communications, battlefield medicine, engineering, and intelligence, one in which every noncommissioned officer must spend a year specializing. If each Special Forces unit had a couple of officers who were fluent in several languages spoken in the theater command (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish in CENTCOM, for example), our ability to project power would dramatically increase.

The forward basing of area commands is another strategy that would encourage area expertise and language skills. In the years to come we should consider moving Central Command headquarters from Tampa, Florida, to the Middle East, and Southern Command headquarters from Miami back to Panama, where it was until 1997. There is simply no substitute for being in the region when it comes to absorbing language and culture. As a journalist, I have found that in my profession people on location always have better instincts for the local situation than people back in the United States, even if they don’t always draw the proper conclusions. Many a mid-level officer has told me that the same holds true in the military.

#### Rule No. 4

##### *Use the Military to Promote Democracy*

In an age of expanding democracy, military and intelligence contacts are more important than ever. Civilian politicians in weak and fledgling parliamentary systems come and go. But leading military and security men remain as behind-the-scenes props, sometimes even getting themselves elected to high office—as has happened in Nigeria, Venezuela, and Russia. “Whoever the President of Kenya is, the same group of guys run their special forces and the President’s bodyguards,” one Army Special Operations officer told me. “We’ve trained them. That translates into diplomatic leverage.”

The U.S. military’s bilateral relationships with foreign armies and their officer corps play a substantial role in safeguarding democratic transitions. Militaries have been the pillars of so many Third World societies for so long that the advent of elections can scarcely make them politically irrelevant, especially in Africa and Latin America. In some places, such as Turkey and Pakistan, the military and security services have at times actually enjoyed a reputation for greater liberalism than the civilian authorities. In Colombia in the mid-1990s the civilian government was tainted by drug money; the military police, who were seen to be less corrupt, helped to save our bilateral relationship.

U.S. security-assistance programs also professionalize foreign militaries, thus helping to prevent coups and to improve the human-rights climate. In the 1980s in El Salvador, Colonel J. S. Roach, a member of the operational planning team there, observed that “the Salvadoran military understood they weren’t supposed to violate human rights, but they believed they were driven to extreme measures by extreme circumstances.” One can debate what members of El Salvador’s military “understood,” but Roach’s team and others pounded home the point that violating human rights almost never makes sense from a pragmatic perspective, because it costs the military the civilian support so necessary to rooting out guerrilla insurgents. “Human rights wasn’t a separate one-hour block at the beginning of the day,” Roach said. “You had to find a way to couch it in the training so that it wasn’t just a moralistic approach.” Human-rights abuses didn’t come to an end in El Salvador, but observers agree that they were sharply curbed.

The world is a gritty, messy place, and there are no perfect solutions. But the fact is that Third World military men are more likely to listen to American officers who brief them about human rights as a tool of counterinsurgency than to civilians who talk about universal principles of justice. At any rate, it isn’t only civilians who talk about universal principles: mid-level officers from around the world are regularly sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for training in the history and necessity of protecting human rights. (The protestors who perennially chain themselves to the gates of Fort Benning, calling its previously named School of the Americas the “School of Torturers,” are implicitly championing the worst possible strategy if they want Latin armies to take human rights seriously—a strategy of isolation, which cuts foreign officers off from American society and values.)

In fact, in places where democracy is especially weak (Peru and Indonesia are obvious examples), a phone call from a U.S. general to a local officer will often advance diplomacy (and also civil society) more effectively than a phone call from the ambassador. Particularly in previously hostile areas, such as the ex-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia, new diplomatic relationships are being eased by the U.S. military’s training of border guards and security services. In other places, as in Chile a decade ago, the resumption of a bilateral military

relationship with the United States cements a successful democratic transition.

The much larger truth is that the very distinction between our civilian and military operations overseas is eroding. In 1994 two Special Forces officers helped the Paraguayan government to craft new laws just after Paraguay's constitution was adopted. The U.S. military will increasingly churn out such chameleons: operatives who combine the traits of soldier, intelligence agent, diplomat, civilian aid worker, and academic. And at the same time that our uniformed officers are acting more like diplomats, our diplomats, particularly our ambassadors, are acting more like generals. It is under the State Department's auspices, not the Pentagon's, that helicopters are leased to the Colombian army to fight narcoterrorists and that a campaign is waged to track small planes suspected of transporting cocaine in the Colombia-Peru-Ecuador region. America's war against narcoterrorists in Colombia has two overseers: General James T. Hill, head of Southern Command, and Anne Patterson, the ambassador to Colombia.

The model for our future diplomats might be Deane Hinton, who oversaw the counterinsurgency operation as the ambassador to El Salvador in the early 1980s and then oversaw U.S. efforts to arm Afghan guerrillas as the ambassador to Pakistan from 1983 to 1987. In both those cases a military strategy would have been unavailing in the absence of a successful "interagency" strategy, which backed diplomatic initiatives and humanitarian aid packages with the power of a cocked gun. The same will be true in Colombia and in al Qaeda-infested Yemen. At the moment "interagency" is a dirty word among many in the field, connoting overlapping bureaucracies with conflicting agendas. But a supple and flexible civilian-military chain of command is an immensely useful tool.

Of course, in violent and chaotic parts of the world such as Afghanistan and Yemen, it is only natural that the soldier will at first be more conspicuous than the Peace Corps worker. Because parts of Yemen have become too dangerous for American civilians, the U.S. military is training the Yemeni military to better project power in the tribal badlands, so that, among other things, our foreign-aid personnel can return there. In Central and South America the U.S. military regularly vaccinates farm animals and treats them for diseases, and the villagers are not less grateful than they would be if the help came from civilians. The same was true with Mongolians treated by a four-person Air Force dental mission dispatched recently by Pacific Command to the Mongolian-Chinese border. The Air Force officers treated eighty-five local inhabitants the day I was there, and also handed out toys to the children. It is the efficacy of a humanitarian mission that morally sanctifies it; not whether it is carried out by civilians or soldiers. And if it serves U.S. interests as this one did—so much the better.

#### **Rule No. 5**

##### ***Be Light and Lethal***

Economy of force—doing the most with the least—has been an imperative of the U.S. military, diplomatic, and intelligence communities since the beginning of the Cold War. It will become even more important as our resources are stretched. Here we can learn a great deal from the history of U.S. policy in Latin America over the past several decades: although many journalists and intellectuals have regarded this policy as something to be ashamed of, the far more significant, operational truth is that it exemplifies how we should act worldwide in the foreseeable future.

**From the archives:**

#### **"Fourth-generation Warfare"** (December 2001)

Pentagon mavericks have been trying for decades to reorient military strategy toward a new kind of threat—the kind we're suddenly facing in the war on terrorism. Now that we've got the war they predicted, will we get the reforms they've been pushing for? By Jason Vest

With Europe the principal Cold War battleground, and Asia the secondary front because of the threat posed by Communist China and North Korea, Latin America took a back seat for decades. The U.S. military had to make do with limited resources while operating in a vast continent. It succeeded thanks to unconventional warfare, which helped the host governments do the real work. In practice that meant aggressive intelligence operations and Special Forces training of local units, combined with domineering diplomacy.

The results were not always pretty and, frankly, not always moral—consider what occurred in Chile in the aftermath of the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende Gossens. Yet for a relatively small investment of money and manpower the United States defeated a belligerent Soviet and Cuban campaign at its back door while paving the way for the democratic transitions and market liberalizations of the 1980s and 1990s. Our "quiet professionals" helped to hunt down and kill the hemispheric agitator Ernesto "Che" Guevara in Bolivia in 1967. Fifty-five Special Forces trainers in El Salvador accomplished more than did 550,000 soldiers in Vietnam. A four-member Special Forces "mobile training team" convinced the Salvadoran police that rather than shooting leftist demonstrators at rallies, they should provide escape routes for the protesters to run away. That turned out to be the most effective kind of human-rights policy.

Economy of force in Latin America produced regimes that in almost every case were better than what the Cubans and the Russians offered. Even in Chile, despite the iniquities of the dictator Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, who took power following Allende's overthrow, the military regime lowered the infant mortality rate from seventy-nine to eleven per 1,000 births and reduced the poverty rate from 30 percent to 11 percent. Privatization gave post-Allende Chile Latin America's only economy comparable to those of the "Asian tigers." America's no-frills molding of political reality in the Western Hemisphere did not require the approval of the UN Security Council, and it did not run the risk of quagmire. There were usually few Americans on the ground in any one Latin country.

Economy of force offers a logic appropriate to an intractable world. Becoming implanted in more than a handful of countries at once spells disaster. And everyone—humanitarian interventionists included—now admits that nation-building, whether in Bosnia, Afghanistan, or Colombia, is fraught with danger, difficulty, and great expense. We shouldn't try to fix a whole society; rather, we should identify a few key elements in it, and fix them.

For example: Because a national army is essentially unreformable without wholesale social and cultural change, we should work to improve only its elite units, using trainers from the U.S. military elite. When it comes to military operations, specialized units should concentrate on the most critical targets; in Colombia, for instance, these would be the 150 or so hydrochloride laboratories throughout Colombia that refine cocaine into its final form. And because individual leaders affect history as much as large social forces do, our efforts should be invested primarily where current leaders seem particularly talented and determined. (Alvaro Uribe Vélez, the President of Colombia, is by all accounts a dynamic workaholic, however embattled, committed both to protecting human rights and to eliminating rogue forces. Were Andrés

Pastrana, Uribe's less forceful predecessor, still Colombia's leader, it is doubtful that the United States would be making quite the effort it is in a place like Arauca.)

The most obvious tool to carry out an economy-of-force strategy is the Special Forces, which, as Lieutenant Colonel Kevin A. Christie told me, can perform the military equivalent of "arthroscopic surgery." Relatively small numbers of Special Forces and Marines can maximize U.S. influence in a large number of countries without risking what the Yale historian Paul Kennedy has called imperial "overstretch." Nevertheless, we shouldn't get carried away. A big increase in the number and use of Special Forces could make them less special, and therefore less effective.

A less obvious resource is the Coast Guard, which handles most anti-terrorism and drug-interdiction efforts at sea. Even in the jet-and-information age 70 percent of inter-continental cargo travels by ship, making the seas as strategic as ever. The U.S. Coast Guard, with 38,000 in its active ranks, is the world's seventh largest navy. In Colombia, which has more miles of navigable river than of passable roadway, the Coast Guard has been essential in drug-patrol training. In Yemen, Bob Innes, a retired Coast Guard captain who worked for many years in Colombia, is building a coast guard to prevent more al Qaeda attacks on oil tankers. Our strategy in Colombia and Yemen is unspoken but simple: establish not a totally reformed military but a self-sustaining structure of a few specialized units. That's the best we will be able to do, and it will not require a heavy American military presence.

The ultimate in economy of force is the "one-man mission," in which a single officer is attached to a foreign army, often at a remote base, to train and advise it. Because there are usually no other Americans around, the officer cannot escape from the local environment, even when he is off duty. Thus he rapidly acquires a hands-on knowledge of the terrain and its inhabitants, making him an intelligence asset for years to come. The military should consider making more use of such missions.

#### **Rule No. 6**

##### ***Bring Back the Old Rules***

I refer to the pre-Vietnam War rules by which small groups of quiet professionals would be used to help stabilize or destabilize a regime, depending on the circumstances and our needs. Covert means are more discreet and cheaper than declared war and large-scale mobilization, and in an age when an industrial economy is no longer necessary for the production of weapons of mass destruction, the American public, burdened with large government deficits, will demand an extraordinary degree of protection for as few tax dollars as possible. Impending technologies, such as bullets that can be directed at specific targets the way larger warheads are today, and satellites that can track the neurobiological signatures of individuals, will make assassinations far more feasible, enabling the United States to kill rulers like Saddam Hussein without having to harm their subject populations through conventional combat.

#### **From the archives:**

["Inside the Department of Dirty Tricks"](#) (December 2001)  
"We're not in the Boy Scouts," Richard Helms was fond of saying when he ran the Central Intelligence Agency. He was correct, of course. By Thomas Powers

As for international law, it has meaning only when war is a distinct and separate condition from peace. As war grows more unconventional, more often undeclared, and more asymmetrical, with the element of surprise becoming the dominant variable, there will be less and less time for demo-

cratic consultation, whether with Congress or with the UN. Instead civilian-military elites in Washington and elsewhere will need to make lightning-quick decisions. In such circumstances the sanction of the so-called international community may gradually lose relevance, even if everyone soberly declares otherwise.

Bringing back the old rules would help to circumvent the UN Security Council, which in any case represents an antiquated power arrangement unreflective of the latest wave of U.S. military modernization in both tactics and weaponry. In the future we should attempt to manage most problems long before they get to the Security Council, by increasingly emphasizing Special Forces and an intelligence service bolstered by its own military wing—an emphasis we applied successfully in Afghanistan. Of course, the CIA's military wing will never be large enough to do everything. Thus the CIA and the Special Forces need to coordinate their efforts more closely, under "black," or super-clandestine, rules of engagement. Not only should the CIA be *greener* (that is, have a larger uniformed military wing), but the Special Forces should be *blacker*.

To be sure, such clandestine methods might not be enough to change a regime like Iraq's. But that kind of regime is exceedingly rare; the diplomatic farce at the UN a few months back, with France and Germany working indefatigably to contain the power of a democratic United States rather than that of a Stalinist, weapons-hungry Iraq, need not be repeated.

As shocking as some of the above may sound, much of what I advocate is already taking place. The old rules, with their accent on discretion, were on the way back even before 9/11. Witness the increasing use of security-consulting firms and defense contractors that employ—in places as diverse as South America, the Caucasus, and West Africa—retired members of the U.S. military to conduct aerial surveillance, to train local armies, and to help struggling friendly regimes. Consider [Military Professional Resources, Inc.](#) (MPRI), of northern Virginia, which during the mid-1990s restructured and modernized the Croatian military. Shortly afterward Croatian battlefield success against the Serbs forced Belgrade to the peace table.

Encouraging an overall moral outcome to the Yugoslav conflict involved methods that were not always defensible in narrowly moral terms; the Croats, too, were murderers. And moral ambiguity is even greater in protracted wars, such as the Cold War and the war on terrorism, in which deals will always have to be struck with bad people and bad regimes for the sake of a larger good. The war on terrorism will not be successful if every aspect of its execution must be disclosed and justified—in terms of universal principles—to the satisfaction of the world media and world public opinion. The old rules are good rules because, as the ancient Chinese philosophers well knew, deception and occasional dirty work are morally preferable to launching a war.

#### **Rule No. 7**

##### ***Remember the Philippines***

The first large-scale encounter between the U.S. military and a guerrilla insurgency came as the United States tried to consolidate control over the Philippine archipelago, a former colony of Spain, after our victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Unfortunately, many of the lessons our military learned from that encounter were for a long time ignored, because the military's performance in one dimension was overshadowed by allegations involving another. As Brian McAllister Linn wrote in his dense and masterly book *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902* (1989), some charges of American brutality against Filipino civilians were certainly justified, and without question the

brutality drew press attention that colors the episode still. Brutality is always inexcusable—but in this instance it was hardly the whole story. Max Boot concludes in *The Savage Wars of Peace* (2002) that U.S. actions in the Philippines constitute “one of the most successful counter-insurgencies waged by a Western army in modern times.” Given the challenges ahead, our experience a century ago in the anarchic Philippines may be more relevant than our recent experience in Iraq.

Modern communications, which seem to unify the world to some degree, often foster the illusion that policies can be one-size-fits-all. Mid-level commanders in the Philippines, however, lacking helicopters and radios, were forced to become policymakers in their own patch of jungle. That was a good thing, and it promoted skills that we need more of: in a rugged topography given over to anarchy—which describes much of the world today—the political, military, and cultural situation is going to vary from micro-region to micro-region. The commanders in the Philippines who were particularly successful emphasized small, mobile units; developed native intelligence sources; and gained information by interrogating captured guerrillas. In some parts of the archipelago the United States was able to exploit ethnic divisions; in other parts it was foolish even to try. In some parts a purely military strategy was called for; in others a civil-affairs and humanitarian-aid component was an absolute necessity. Nevertheless, as Linn observed, It was only when the Army could separate the guerrillas from the civilians and prevent the guerrillas from disrupting civil organization that social reform was possible. Officers in the Philippines, no matter how benevolent their intentions, realized that the military objective, the defeat of the guerrillas, was the most essential of their tasks.

In other words, in areas still not pacified by our troops, it is perfectly appropriate to see more soldiers than aid workers. But those soldiers, as William Howard Taft (then the head of the Philippine Commission) and Brigadier General Frederick Funston both observed, should be led by field officers of exceptional character, with hands-on area expertise.

#### **Rule No. 8**

##### ***The Mission Is Everything***

No mission should ever be compromised by diplomatic punctilio. That sounds obvious, and at the same time is often impossible to implement. But here is what happens when this rule is broken.

In the late 1990s Nigerian soldiers deputized by the international community were in Sierra Leone, not only to keep the peace but also, if truth be told, in some cases to steal alluvial diamonds. Like other African peacekeeping contingents in Sierra Leone, the Nigerians weren't always paid by their own government, even though the government was getting money from the international community to provide peacekeeping. Some of these contingents were openly incompetent; the Zambians, for instance, were a battalion of mechanics, cooks, and clerks. But the United Nations said little about any of this; instead it officially accepted the obvious falsehood that all national armies are roughly equal. Diplomatic nicety had completely compromised the mission. The result: the peacekeeping effort nearly collapsed as demoralized and incompetent peacekeepers surrendered without a fight to murderous teenage paramilitaries, who closed in on the capital of Freetown. Order was restored only after the British government dispatched commandos to Sierra Leone. Mounted on rooftops at the airport, a contingent of those commandos shot and killed any rebel who emerged from the bush. For the British, only the mission mattered.

When Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector, demonstrated little enthusiasm for bringing Iraqi scientists and their families out of Iraq (even though other Iraqi scientists, once outside their country, had in the past provided valuable intelligence to the West) he revealed that for the UN, yet again, the mission was not everything.

Unfortunately, for the United States the mission is not always everything either. It is often hamstrung by diplomacy and domestic public opinion. The Special Forces are allowed to train and advise local counterparts, but because of restrictions imposed by the United States and, often, the host country as well, they typically have to wave good-bye when local troops take to the field to fight. This can be demoralizing to our elite units, whose members are not draftees serving out their time but professional warriors prepared daily to take measured risks—risks that may seem incredible to timid politicians and other outsiders. And when host-country soldiers are wounded, we should not be prohibited from helping them get to our field clinics, as is sometimes the case. Our elite units should be allowed to provide air cover for local allies, and to help direct operations on the ground. There are no such limits in Afghanistan; ideally that would be the case everywhere. Successful imperial militaries have traditionally fought alongside indigenous troops.

Moreover, arbitrary troop limits set by Congress, known as “force caps,” which have restricted Green Beret trainers to fifty-five in El Salvador and our troops in Colombia to 400, should be more flexible. Also, embassy Marines and Army support staff should not be part of the calculation; force caps should apply only to the advisers and training teams in the field. Every one of our Green Berets is a force multiplier, to the extent that an extra ten or twenty of them could make an exponential difference in the success of a mission. If a cap needs stretching a bit, the U.S. ambassador and the U.S. military commander in the host country should be able to stretch it on their own. To think that any of this would risk another Vietnam is alarmist.

Compromising the mission, moreover, can mean needlessly compromising our soldiers' safety. Since the destruction of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, and of military apartments at Khobar Towers, in Saudi Arabia, in 1996, our generals and politicians have needed a commandment: Thou shalt not be sitting ducks. U.S. troops should never be concentrated in a place where they cannot aggressively patrol the surrounding area. Yet that was the situation I observed near the town of Saravena, in northeastern Colombia: because the rules of engagement set by our policymakers and the Colombian government did not allow for aggressive patrolling, a few dozen Green Berets and their support staff were concentrated there in barracks vulnerable to a possible attack by cylinder bombs. That may be politically sound, but it is tactically dumb. And it is morally wrong, because it denies our warriors the means of self-defense. In Saravena the mission was not everything.

#### **Rule No. 9**

##### ***Fight on Every Front***

In their recent article [“An Emerging Synthesis for a New Way of War.”](#) published in the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Air Force Colonels James Callard and Peter Faber describe what they call “combination warfare”—a concept derived from a 1999 Chinese text by two colonels in the People's Liberation Army, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. In the twenty-first century a single conflict may include not only traditional military activity but also financial warfare, trade warfare, resource warfare, legal warfare, and so on. The authors explain that it may eventually involve even ecological

warfare (the manipulation of the heretofore “natural” world, altering the climate). Because combination warfare draws on all spheres of human activity, it is the ultimate in total war. It “seeks to overwhelm others by assaulting them in as many domains ... as possible,” Callard and Faber write. “It creates sustained, and possibly shifting, pressure that is hard to anticipate.”

Combination warfare has already begun, though it has yet to be codified in military doctrine. The most important front, in a way, may be the media. Like the priests of ancient Egypt, the rhetoricians of ancient Greece and Rome, and the theologians of medieval Europe, the media constitute a burgeoning class of bright and ambitious people whose social and economic stature can have the effect of undermining political authority. The media increasingly, and dramatically, affect policy yet bear no responsibility for the outcome.

In terms of U.S. national interests, media attitudes have gotten both worse and better in recent years. American leaders deal less and less with strictly American media and more and more with global ones, as elite U.S. news organs increasingly make use of foreign nationals and global cosmopolitans with multiple passports. The new, global media think in terms of abstract universal principles—the traditional weapon of the weak seeking to restrain the strong—even as the primary responsibility of our policymakers must be to maintain our strength vis-à-vis China, Russia, and the rest of the world. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the resurgence of patriotism among American journalists; the political divide between Europe and the United States in the buildup to the war in Iraq, and during this war itself, was mirrored by a divide between the European and the U.S. media. Still, this trend may be ephemeral.

Because the consequences of attack by weapons of mass destruction are so catastrophic, the United States will periodically have no choice but to act pre-emptively on limited evidence, exposing our actions to challenge by journalists, to say nothing of millions of protesters who are increasingly able to coordinate their demonstrations worldwide. The enormous anti-war demonstrations on several continents last February revealed that life inside the post-industrial cocoon of Western democracy has made people incapable of imagining life inside a totalitarian system. With affluence often comes not only the loss of imagination but also the loss of historical memory. Thus global economic growth in the twenty-first century can be expected to create mass societies even more deluded than the ones we have now—the very actions necessary to protect human rights and democracy will become increasingly hard to explain to those who have never been deprived of them. The masses “show no concern for the causes and reasons” behind their own well-being, observed the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1929), a book that was equally prescient about the Fascist rallies of the 1930s and the youth rebellion of the 1960s. Indeed, the peace demonstrators last February appeared to have no idea whatsoever that their very freedom to demonstrate had been won by war and conquest in the service of liberty—precisely what the U.S. and British governments were proposing to do in Iraq. Of course, the masses are uninterested, as Ortega noted. “Since they do not see, behind the benefits of civilization, ... they imagine that their role is limited to demanding these benefits peremptorily, as if they were natural rights.”

A nation whose businesses can regularly sell products that people neither want nor need should be able to market a foreign policy better than it usually does. Just as leading companies harvest the best former government officials, our

government will have to find the budget and the will to hire away the best communicators for this marketing effort. We also need diplomats who are fluent in local languages and dialects and whose sole job is to appear on foreign talk shows (in the Middle East and elsewhere) and be available to local journalists for interviews, so as to better represent our point of view. This occurs too infrequently at the moment. Here, too, we desperately need more area experts; and we need more hyphenated Americans and language specialists inside government. Moreover, it is now a strategic imperative that the United States Information Agency, gutted by the Clinton Administration under pressure from Senator Jesse Helms, be reinvented.

Some may argue that an effective information strategy is largely a matter of telling and spinning the truth. But the truth needs lots of help in societies marked by mass illiteracy, where rumors and conspiracy theories are the rule rather than the exception. That is because where few of the men and almost none of the women can read, news can be communicated only orally; thus it is even more quickly subject to distortion. In the context of mass illiteracy, the growing array of CNN-like networks in Arabic and other languages creates the conditions for a tidal wave of hysteria to be generated by a single inaccurate news report. Destructive rumors and conspiracy theories need to be countered quickly.

#### **From the archives:**

[“Who Shot Mohammed al-Dura?”](#) (June 2003). An object lesson in the incendiary power of an icon. By James Fallows

Indeed, the best information strategy is to avoid attention-getting confrontations in the first place and to keep the public’s attention as divided as possible. We can dominate the world only quietly: off camera, so to speak. The moment the public focuses on a single crisis like the one in Iraq, that crisis is no longer analyzed on its merits: instead it becomes a rallying point around which lonely and alienated people in a global mass society can define themselves through an uplifting group identity, be it European, Muslim, anti-war intellectual, or whatever.

Nevertheless, although media coverage of the war in Iraq was unprecedented, many wars will continue to be fought with few journalists in sight, and consequently with little public awareness. Look at the Congo, where more than three million people have died in conflict since the late 1990s without any significant peace protests in the West. Military conflicts in Colombia, the Philippines, Nepal, and other places may as well be happening in secret. Our intelligence officers, backed by commando detachments, should in the future be given as much leeway as they require to get the job done, so that problems won’t fester to the point where we have to act in front of a battery of television cameras.

#### **Rule No. 10**

#### ***Speak Victorian, Think Pagan***

As noted, imperialism in antiquity was in many respects a strain of isolationism: the demand for absolute security at home led powers to try to dominate the world around them. That pagan-Roman model of imperialism contrasts sharply with the altruistic Victorian one, exemplified by Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone in his comment about protecting “the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan.” Americans are truly idealistic by nature, but even if we weren’t, our historical and geographical circumstances would necessitate that U.S. foreign policy be robed in idealism, so as to garner public support and ultimately be effective. And yet security concerns necessarily make our foreign policy more pagan. The idealistic shorthand of “democracy,” “economic development,” and



“human rights,” by means of which the media make sense of events in distant parts of the world, conceals many harsh and complicated ground-level truths. Remember that even Gladstone’s vision was more effectively implemented by the realpolitik of statesmen such as Lord Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli, and the Marquess of Salisbury, who kept illiberal empires like Germany and Russia at bay, sometimes through sheer deviousness, and also arranged for the retaking of Sudan from Islamic extremists.

By sustaining ourselves first, we will be able to do the world the most good. Some 200 countries, plus thousands of nongovernmental organizations, represent a chaos of interests. Without the organizing force of a great and self-interested liberal power, they are unable to advance the interests of humanity as a whole.

And there is this coda: Just as, following the explorations of Portuguese and other mariners, the oceans became a new arena for great power struggles, so will outer space. We have recognized this by creating a U.S. Space Command, which is now a part of the U.S. Strategic Command. The only question now is whether the United States will invest enough in the military technology required to dominate space. If a less liberal power such as China does so instead, then American dominance will be particularly short-lived, no matter how successful the war on terrorism.

No doubt there are some who see an American empire as the natural order of things for all time. That is not a wise outlook. The task ahead for the United States has an end point, and in all probability the end point lies not beyond the conceptual horizon but in the middle distance—a few decades from now. For a limited period the United States has the power to write the terms for international society, in hopes that when the country’s imperial hour has passed, new international institutions and stable regional powers will have begun to flourish, creating a kind of civil society for the world. The historian E. H. Carr once observed that “every approach in the past to a world society has been the product of the ascendancy of a single Power.” Such ascendancy allows all manner of worldwide connections—economic, cultural, institutional—to be made in a context of order and stability. There will be nothing approaching a true world government, but we may be able to nurture a loose set of global arrangements that have arisen organically among responsible and like-minded states.

If this era of reluctant imperium is to leave a lasting global mark, we must know what we are up to; we must have a sense that supremacy is bent toward a purpose and is not simply an end in itself. In many ways the few decades immediately ahead will be the trickiest ones that our policymakers have ever faced: they are charged with the job of running an empire that looks forward to its own obsolescence.

Winston Churchill saw in the United States a worthy successor to the British Empire, one that would carry on Britain’s liberalizing mission. We cannot rest until something emerges that is just as estimable and concrete as what Churchill saw when he gazed across the Atlantic.