

Testing Out

“OUR policy has always been to work hard for peace but to be prepared if war comes. Yet, so blurred have the lines become between open conflict and half-hidden hostile acts that we cannot confidently predict where ... aggression may arrive,” said the Secretary of Defense. “We must be prepared, at any moment, to meet threats ranging in intensity from isolated terrorist acts, to guerrilla action, to full-scale military confrontation.”

The Defense Secretary quoted here is not Chuck Hagel. It was Caspar Weinberger, and the year was 1984. This call for readiness resonates just as strongly three decades later, as the nation begins to extricate itself from Afghanistan and to think seriously about how the military should—and should not—be used in the future.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been enormously costly in both lives and dollars. They have eroded the nation’s military readiness, strained budgets, and tragically brought death home to thousands of American families. The US does not have unlimited money, equipment, or an infinite supply of trained and ready forces, so going forward the nation must exercise caution before choosing new military operations.

“Recent history has proven that we cannot assume unilaterally the role of the world’s defender,” Weinberger noted in another passage. “We have learned that there are limits to how much of our spirit and blood and treasure we can afford to forfeit in meeting our responsibility to keep peace and freedom.”

More than ever, the United States needs to pick its fights. It is easy to begin an intervention; it is often much more difficult to end one. This, in fact, was the main purpose of Weinberger’s “Uses of Military Power” speech: to lay out the questions the nation should answer before sending forces into harm’s way.

Weinberger posited a series of six “tests” policymakers need to consider before committing US forces to overseas combat missions. The tests are:

1) The US should not commit forces unless a vital national interest is at stake.

2) Troops should be sent wholeheartedly, with the clear intent of winning.

3) There should be clearly defined objectives.

4) Forces should be continuously assessed and adjusted as necessary.

5) There should be a reasonable expectation of public and congressional support.

6) Commitment of US forces to combat should be a last resort.

This call for caution came to be known as the Weinberger Doctrine, and it reflected the lessons of both Vietnam and the 1983 debacle in Bei-

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rut, Lebanon—where, with an unclear mission, US troops were tasked as peacekeepers in the middle of a multi-sided civil war.

The doctrine was refined by Gen. Colin Powell while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1992.

Powell suggested two other key considerations:

First, force should be overwhelming.

Second, the nation should have a clear exit strategy.

The 1991 Persian Gulf War epitomized the concepts in the Weinberger and Powell Doctrines, but interventionists on both the left and right began whittling away at it almost from Day 1.

Those favoring various humanitarian or peacekeeping operations felt the principles were needlessly restrictive (See “Keeper File,” p. 80). “What’s the point of having this superb military that you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?” Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once grouched to Powell.

The doctrine also restricted those who sought more proactive or adventurous use of US military force. These interventionists naturally expected their chosen operations to be quick and relatively easy, like the 1983 Grenada conflict, 1989 Panama conflict, and the 1991 Iraq war.

But the peril of keeping US forces in dangerous environments, with unclear objectives, has been shown time and again: in Vietnam, Beirut, Somalia in 1993, and most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US military is now

out of Iraq, and is drawing down in Afghanistan, having accomplished all that it can reasonably hope to accomplish there.

At some point the people of Afghanistan will have to decide if they want peace, stop harboring the Taliban, and begin building their nation. The US cannot do this for them, has clearly worn out its welcome, and the continued US presence may actually be hindering Afghanistan’s self-sufficiency by creating dependence.

Unfortunately, there will always be terrorists, just as there will always be nations that threaten their neighbors or kill their own citizens. Deploying forces to “fix” every situation will draw the US into an endless set of battles around the world.

Policymakers from the President on down need to keep this in mind as they ponder the never-ending drumbeat of calls to intervene in Congo, Syria, Iran, or wherever the next crisis de jour may be.

A small number of these demands for military action support vital national interests, but most do not. Most do not justify American deaths or a further degradation of military readiness. The US military will answer the call when it is put into action, but the calls need to be more essential and less frequent. After nearly 12 years of land combat—and 23 years of the Air Force being on war footing—the armed forces need a break, a breather, and a chance to reconstitute.

To be clear: this is not a call for isolationism, nor is it a set of inflexible hard and fast rules. It is difficult to claim there was a key national interest at stake defending the Libyan rebels in 2011, but the outcome served a moral good and the US wisely avoided sending in ground troops and let other nations take the lead.

The drawdown in Afghanistan presents the United States with a strategic opportunity to reset its forces and rebuild its air, space, and cyber power. These forces are critical for defending what really are the key national interests.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, the Weinberger and Powell doctrines were completely cast aside.

It is time to bring them back. ■