

Long after the United States pulled out of Vietnam, the memory of the conflict hung over the nation like a cloud. The armed forces left 58,178 dead there in the first war the US had ever lost—and which the nation did not fight to win.

The war was micromanaged from Washington, where political leaders—fearful of escalation that might draw in China or the Soviet Union—imposed all sorts of crippling restrictions. The enemy operated from sanctuaries that US forces were not allowed to strike. The conflict dragged on, prosecuted with varying intensity, until 1973 when the US declared “peace with honor” and withdrew.

The national consensus was that the nation should never again be drawn into such an open-ended conflict so lacking in direction and commitment. A new term, the “Vietnam syndrome,” described a situation in which the armed forces supposedly were left combat shy by the defeat in Vietnam.

The War Powers Resolution of 1973 curtailed the President’s authority to send forces into areas of “hostilities” without a declaration of war or statutory authorization, except in cases of dire national emergency. Even then, the action had to be terminated within 60 days unless it was extended by Congress.

In a campaign speech in 1980, presidential candidate Ronald Reagan said, “For too long, we have lived with the Vietnam syndrome.” Moments later, however, Reagan added that “there is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam. If we are forced to fight, we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.”

Caspar Weinberger, nominated by Reagan to be Secretary of Defense, picked up the theme in Senate confirmation hearings in January 1981, declaring that the United States should not go to war unless vital national interests were at stake.

Weinberger famously codified his position in a speech at the National Press Club Nov. 28, 1984, when he announced “six major tests to be applied when we are weighing the use of US combat forces abroad.”

Forces should be committed, he said, only if (1) vital national interests are at stake; (2) the nation is prepared to commit enough forces to win; (3) clear political and military objectives have been established; (4) forces are sized

to achieve those objectives; (5) there is reasonable assurance of support of American people and Congress; and (6) other options have been exhausted before US forces are committed as a last resort.

Weinberger said he was charting a course between two extremes. “The first—undue reserve—would lead us ultimately to withdraw from international events that require free nations to defend their interests from the aggressive use of force,” he said. “The second alternative—employing our forces almost indiscriminately and as a regular and customary part of our diplomatic efforts—would surely plunge us headlong into the sort of domestic turmoil we experienced during the Vietnam War, without accomplishing the goal for which we committed our forces.”

It was dubbed the “Weinberger Doctrine” two days later in a *Washington Post* editorial. “In a sense, Mr. Weinberger is simply distilling the post-Vietnam consensus,” it said.

The Weinberger

A terrorist truck filled with explosives destroys the Marine Corps barracks at the airport in Beirut, on Oct. 23, 1983. The attack killed 243 Americans. Above right: Rescuers comb through the rubble of the barracks.

“Secretary Weinberger has not ended the debate on these essential questions, but he has reopened it in a serious and stylish way. His speech now becomes the central text to which the others must respond.”

Scorn From the Commentators

The Weinberger Doctrine was well-received in the armed forces but the prevailing reaction from columnists and commentators was disdain and ridicule. In a satirical piece in the *Chicago Tribune*, Michael Kilian portrayed Weinberger as “in search of the lovable war.” In the *New York Times*, William Safire accused Weinberger of advocating only the “fun wars” and promulgating a “hunker-down, lash-out doctrine.”

Syndicated columnist Ben Wattenberg, a former speechwriter for President Lyndon B. Johnson, said Weinberger “has surfaced a naïve, dovish, and dangerous idea that has been simmering in the Pentagon.” James McCartney in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* leapt to the strange conclusion that “when a Defense Secretary talks about going all out to ‘win’ wars nowadays, it should be remembered that he could be raising the specter of nuclear war.”

Political critics weighed in, too. J. William Fulbright, former chair-

Photo by SSGT. Randy Gaido



Doctrine

By John T. Correll

THIRTY YEARS LATER, IT IS STILL THE YARDSTICK AGAINST WHICH THE USE OF FORCE IS MEASURED.

USMC photo





Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger holds a press briefing at the Pentagon in 1981.

man of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, writing with professor Seth Tillman in the *New York Times*, said that Weinberger's tests were "so broad and subjective" that "it is hardly likely they would have posed a serious obstacle to our involvement and escalation in Vietnam."

Leslie Gelb, who had been study director for the Pentagon Papers in the 1960s, said in a *New York Times* op-ed, "The Secretary's was a classic statement of the traditional military point of view—black and white, win or lose—as against the blurred and gray world of the diplomat."

Army Times, a newspaper attuned to a different constituency, saw it from another perspective: "In his speech, Weinberger showed that he, at least, has learned the crucial lesson of the Vietnam War: that military force should never be used in a half-hearted pursuit of ill-defined ends. It is a lesson that must be etched in the consciousness of America's political leaders as indelibly as the inscriptions of the 58,000 names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial."

The principal opponent of the Weinberger Doctrine (and Weinberger's great rival in the Reagan cabinet) was Secretary of State George P. Shultz. He did not mention Weinberger directly in a speech in December 1984 but his

intent was clear to all. There are many instances in which military power can be used legitimately, Shultz said, and "there is no such thing as guaranteed public support in advance."

Reagan, Weinberger, and Shultz

Weinberger and Shultz had locked horns previously over the use of US marines as part of a multinational peace-

keeping force in Lebanon. Against the advice of Weinberger and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John W. Vessey Jr.—and at the urging of the National Security Council staff and the State Department—a contingent of 1,200 marines deployed in 1982 to the Beirut airport in the middle of a complicated civil war.

The NSC staff, Weinberger said, seemed to "spend most of their time thinking up ever more wild adventures for our troops." Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs wanted to bring the marines home soon, pointing out that they had no defined objective in Lebanon and no mission other than providing a military presence.

Reagan backed Shultz rather than Weinberger, and the marines were still in Beirut on Oct. 23, 1983, when a terrorist truck bombing of the barracks at the airport killed 241 Americans. The attack was carried out by elements of what would become the Hezbollah Islamic militant group.

The remaining marines were withdrawn, over Shultz's objections. In October 1984, a year after the Beirut truck bombing, Shultz said the United States had to maintain "the capability to act on a moment's notice. There will be no time for a renewed national debate after every terrorist attack. We may never have the kind of evidence that can stand up in an American court of law, but we cannot allow ourselves to become the Hamlet of nations, worrying endlessly over whether and how to respond."

AP photo by Dennis Cook



Lt. Gen. Colin Powell (r) speaks at a ceremony for outgoing Defense Secretary Weinberger (l) in November 1987 as President Ronald Reagan (c) listens. At the time, Powell was Reagan's nominee for National Security Advisor.



AP photo by J. Scott Applewhite

That set the stage for Weinberger's Press Club speech a month later, in which he declared the six tests for committing US forces to combat. Shultz took a final shot in his memoirs, published in 1993, in which he said the Weinberger Doctrine "was the Vietnam syndrome in spades, carried to an absurd level, and a complete abdication of the duties of leadership."

For his part, Reagan later said that "the sending of the marines to Beirut was the source of my greatest regret and my greatest sorrow as President," and he listed a set of principles "to guide America in the application of military force abroad." They were a close paraphrase of the Weinberger Doctrine.

The "Powell Doctrine"

The Gulf War of 1991 met the conditions of the Weinberger Doctrine completely. Persian Gulf resources had been defined as vital to the US since January 1980 when President Jimmy Carter pledged we would defend our interests there "by any means necessary, including military force." In contrast to the uncertain gradualism that characterized the Vietnam War, US forces began Operation Desert Storm with adequate strength to achieve the clear objectives assigned. The Gulf War not only had the support of public opinion and Congress but also the backing of the international community.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1991 was Gen. Colin L. Powell, who had been Weinberger's military

assistant. Weinberger had asked him to take a look at the Press Club speech in draft and Powell went along with him on the day he delivered it. Powell agreed with Weinberger on all points.

Writing about the Gulf War in the *New York Times* in 1992, Powell said, "The reason for our success is that in every instance we have carefully matched the use of military force to our political objectives. President Bush, more than any other recent president, understands the proper use of military force. In every instance, he has made sure that the objective was clear and that we knew what we were getting into. We owe it to the men and women who go in harm's way to make sure that their lives are not squandered for unclear purposes."

Increasingly, the underlying concepts were spoken of as the "Weinberger-Powell Doctrine" or even the "Powell Doctrine." According to *Washington Post* reporters Rick Atkinson and Bob Woodward, Powell contributed what they called the element of "invincible force" in a combination described as "Weinberger Plus." Powell himself usually referred to it as "decisive military means."

One of the first to completely cross the line in terminology was political-military theorist Edward N. Luttwak, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* Nov. 10, 1992. He said, "The Powell Doctrine is an extreme case of bureaucratic self-protection" and that Powell "insists that the United States should send its forces into danger only if there is a perfectly clear-cut combat goal and overwhelming

Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visits an air base in Saudi Arabia in 1990. The 1991 Gulf War fully met Weinberger's six tests, which Powell supported.

force to achieve it."

It is questionable whether Powell's point about decisive military means/overwhelming force constituted a new doctrine or if it was an amplification of the "sufficient forces to win" prescribed by Weinberger. Powell did not otherwise add to the conditions for use of force.

In the run-up to the 1996 presidential election, Powell's opponents, seeking to block his nomination as the Republican candidate, misconstrued the Weinberger Doctrine as weak and timid, relabeled it the Powell Doctrine, and used it as an instrument in a "Stop Powell" movement. It was nothing but a contrived political convenience, but it contributed to the myth that the famous conditions for use of force had been established by Powell.

Sending Signals

The doctrine, by whatever name, came under intense attack when the Clinton Administration took office in January 1993. The new Secretary of Defense was Les Aspin Jr. Previously, when he had been chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Aspin drew a distinction between two schools of military employment, which he described as "Limited Objectives" versus "All or Nothing."

The All-or-Nothing school "says that if you aren't ready to put the pedal to



Secretary of State John Kerry (l) and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov go separate ways after greeting each other at the US Ambassador's residence in Paris, France, Jan. 13. Kerry had previously speculated about a small, "very limited" war to punish Syria's Assad regime.

the holy month of Ramadan would be profoundly offensive.

The Doctrine in Disrepute

After Powell retired, his views and Weinberger's were challenged more often by factions in the armed forces. In 1995, Thomas Ricks reported in the *Wall Street Journal* that some senior officers in the Pentagon, especially in the Navy and the Marine Corps, were unhappy with the Powell Doctrine. "Those lesser sorts of military engagement to support diplomacy historically have been specialties of the Navy and the Marines," Ricks noted.

Jeffrey Record, a former congressional staffer who had joined the faculty of the Air War College, was a frequent critic. In "Weinberger-Powell Doctrine Doesn't Cut It" in the Naval Institute's *Proceedings* magazine in 2000, Record called the doctrine "simplistic and flawed" and said there was "no consensus of what constitutes vital national interests. ... A distinguishing feature of great powers is that they are prepared to threaten and even go to war on behalf of nonvital interests for such purposes as demonstrating credibility and maintaining order."

Popular author Max Boot said, "So few missions short of World War II satisfy the Powell checklist that, if strictly applied, it becomes a recipe for inaction." Among those continuing to support the Weinberger Doctrine were the Air Force Association and its journal, *Air Force Magazine*.

When airliners hijacked by terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in rural Pennsylvania in September 2001, the case for use of force in Afghanistan was indisputable. There was less certainty when the effort was redirected to Iraq in 2003, especially after the main justification, the assumption that Iraq was preparing weapons of mass destruction, was found to be mistaken. Over the next several years, the Global War on Terrorism evolved to include an emphasis on nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A major assumption of the new National Defense Strategy in 2005 was that irregular warfare—terrorism, insurgency, and other nonconventional conflict—had become the dominant form of likely engagement for US forces.

In 2010, Adm. Michael G. Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, "We must not look upon

the floor don't start the engine," Aspin said, predicting that "things are going to tilt future debates somewhat in the direction of the Limited Objectives school." In a news release from the Armed Services Committee, Aspin said, "People may not be willing to pay \$250 billion or even \$200 billion a year for a military that is not very useful. It may be that to maintain a military for the extreme contingencies, it will be necessary to show that it is useful for the lesser contingencies, too."

Aspin's looser approach led to disaster in Somalia in 1993 (the notorious "Black Hawk Down" incident) where humanitarian relief turned into armed peacekeeping of a vague and tentative sort and 18 US soldiers were killed trying to capture a warlord who was riding around in a US airplane two months later.

Another believer in Limited Objectives was Madeleine K. Albright, Clinton's ambassador to the UN, who asked Powell, "What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

Clinton did not reappoint Powell for a third term as Chairman, for which he was eligible. Instead, in October 1993, he chose Army Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, who was more amenable to views of the Administration. Shalikashvili went to some length in disagreeing with the Weinberger

Doctrine, declaring that he had no right to put a sign on his door saying, "I'm sorry—we only do the big ones."

In his first annual report to Congress, William J. Perry, who replaced Aspin as Secretary of Defense in 1994, broadened the use of the armed forces to include instances when "the United States has important but not vital national interests at stake." National security advisor Anthony Lake identified seven "circumstances" in which military force might be used. One of them was "to maintain our reliability, because when our partnerships are strong and confidence in our leadership is high, it is easier to get others to work with us."

American officials quoted by the *New York Times* said the reason for air strikes near Sarajevo in 1995—Operation Deliberate Force—was to "drop a few bombs and see what happens." That was four years before Operation Allied Force ousted the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic in 1999.

In February 1998, discussing air strikes against Iraq, Albright—by then Secretary of State—said, "We are talking about using military force, but we are not talking about war. That is an important distinction." In December 1998, Operation Desert Fox sent 650 air sorties and 400 cruise missile strikes against Iraq, but it was called off after 70 hours, in part because some felt bombing during

the use of military forces only as a last resort, but as potentially the best, first option when combined with other instruments of national and international power. We must not try to use force only in an overwhelming capacity, but in the proper capacity, and in a precise and principled manner." It was interpreted as a repudiation of Weinberger and Powell.

Through the Lens of Syria

How far US policy had drifted from the Weinberger Doctrine was starkly demonstrated during the Syria crisis of 2013. A chemical weapons attack Aug. 21 by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces killed more than 1,400 civilians outside Damascus.

President Obama had warned Assad in 2012 that "a red line for us is [when] we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized." Following the Damascus attacks, the Administration shifted into high gear and floated a plan for strikes against Syria, disclosing details—and limits—of the envisioned operation.

"The options we are considering are not about regime change," said White House spokesman Jay Carney. Other

officials said the objectives included punishing Assad and sending him "a very clear signal." The operation would take the form of a cruise missile attack, launched by Navy destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean. There would be no air strikes or US ground forces.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry said it would be "a very limited, very targeted, very short-term effort that degrades his capacity to deliver chemical weapons" and "an unbelievably small, limited kind of effort."

Obama said, "Any action that we contemplate and partners like France might contemplate would be limited, proportionate, and appropriate and focused on deterring the use of chemical weapons in the future and degrading the Assad regime's capacity to use chemical weapons."

The *Washington Post* reported that some military leaders had "serious reservations" about the impending strike. According to the *New York Times*, the "drum major for intervention" in Syria was Kerry.

Opinion polls found that only 30 percent of the public supported a strike on Syria. Kerry attributed the reluctance to "an enormous Iraq hangover," which

sounded like the modern equivalent of the Vietnam syndrome.

The whole thing fizzled out in early September when Assad agreed to a casual comment by Kerry in a news conference that Syria could avert an attack by placing its weapons under international control. The Administration doubted Assad's sincerity but had no choice except to fold its initiative for a strike.

Comparisons with Weinberger were inevitable. Despite all the criticism, no one has yet come forward with a comprehensive alternative to his six tests. Often disparaged and sometimes declared dead, the tests keep bobbing back up. Events have a way of making them look reasonable, even wise.

Thirty years later, in the absence of anything that credibly supersedes it, Weinberger's Doctrine is still the yardstick against which the use of force is measured. ■

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