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Richard Szafranski

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Thinking About Small Wars

RICHARD SZAFRANSKI

This article is intended to be the intellectual and literary equivalent of a raid. It has a limited objective, its duration is expected to be short, and it resides on the lower end of the continuum of disputations (a spectrum running from single, great ideas all the way to tedious, encyclopedic arguments). Like its subject, it will be a low-intensity essay. Its objective? To focus thinking on armed interventions and small wars in a way unencumbered by current formal doctrinal debates.

We are entering an era when the likelihood for armed interventions to protect our nation's interests by affecting the affairs of other organized groups or states could increase. It matters little whether we call this class of armed intervention low-intensity conflict, or contingency and limited objective warfare, or some other name. What does matter is that our armed forces are prepared to fight.

Our forces fought well in Operation Just Cause, but it is unlikely that the unique circumstances of that Panamanian intervention will ever be repeated.¹ Thus any expectation that Just Cause will be the model for future operations may be ill-founded. Likewise, the belief that the long-awaited doctrine on low-intensity conflict may adequately prepare us for future interventions may also be incorrect.² We need to be prepared to fight even when engaged in civil-military operations and peacekeeping roles.

But, some may counter, an armed intervention comprising, for example, a mere show of force will not necessarily involve combat. To which I would reply that we do not and cannot control all the votes. Since we have only limited control over an adversary's response to our intervention, we may find ourselves in a small but violent clash. *Our* intervention may be transformed into *their* war. Unless we have given sufficient thought to fighting small wars, it is less likely that we will be prepared to fight them successfully.

If Clausewitz is correct, present in all military interventions are the two basic ingredients for war, or at least warfare: politically-organized opposed and hostile wills, and the capability to use armed forces to oppose or secure political objectives. Although violence is always a possibility in military interventions, sustained violent resistance may not always be encountered. For example, raids and force interpositions are more likely to be opposed (by at least defensive actions) than shows of force or demonstrations. But experience teaches that *any* military act might be opposed.

As we might have expected, the Libyan raid was opposed, as was the recent reinforcement and employment of forward-deployed forces in Panama. Certainly the Marines did not expect their peacekeeping interposition between belligerents in Beirut to have the tragic outcome that it did. And both the USS *Roberts* and the USS *Stark* suffered damage when even their presence in the Persian Gulf was contested.

The decision to oppose an armed intervention with armed regular or irregular forces is the *adversary's* to make, based on the adversary's political goals and calculations of risk and consequence. These calculations may be made by a logic incomprehensible to us and result in conclusions we might judge as ranging from sage to insane. Although in some cases everyone but the adversary might agree that resistance would be futile (if not plainly suicidal), the adversary may still decide to fight. Likewise, and at least initially, the adversary may have freedom to shape the battlefield by determining the timing, tempo, and form resistance will take. Should armed force be used to resist what we intended to be merely a small and limited military intervention, the result could be warfare or a small war.

Small wars, whatever their genesis, are likely to be wars fought against the forces of a lesser power, or against the proxies or surrogates of a greater power. They are fought, and will be fought, in those areas where we perceive our security or interests are imperiled. These interests are political, but within that broad domain may reside considerations of trade, resources, access and basing, protection of our citizens, elimination of criminal elements, maintenance of a regional balance of power, or sustaining a government favorable to our country or to the governments of our allies or friends. The most likely sites of conflict are the Caribbean, the Middle East, and the Pacific littoral.³

Colonel Richard Szafranski, USAF, is a 1990 graduate of the Air War College. He holds a baccalaureate degree from Florida State University and earned an M.A. degree in management from Central Michigan University. A joint specialty officer, he has spent most of his career in Strategic Air Command as a B-52 instructor pilot, flight commander, operations officer, and bomb squadron commander. Before attending the Air War College, he was the commander of Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado. Colonel Szafranski's essay "A SIOP for Perestroika?" won the Joint Chiefs of Staff Strategy Essay Competition for the best paper written by a US senior service college student in Academic Year 1989-90.

Small wars are likely to be small for four reasons. First, the political objectives of our intervention are likely to be specific. Second, finite political objectives will tend to limit the military objectives. Third, limited military objectives and the political necessity to keep the scope of the conflict as nonthreatening to other states as possible will probably restrain us from bringing to bear all the force we have available. Last, they will be small because our likely enemies will be unable to engage in anything larger than a small war unless other countries sustain them. If other countries do sustain them, thus compelling an increase in our forces to secure our original objectives or new and larger ones, warfare may escalate from the small category into something else. Nonetheless, the size or site of the conflict may not always be a good preconflict indicator of its intensity.

Intensity is the product of many interactive variables, including the value placed on objectives, the strength of the opposed wills, and the armaments and training of the forces engaged. In his philosophy on warfighting, codified in Fleet Marine Forces Manual 1, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Alfred M. Gray, asserts that intensity is determined by the "density of fighting forces or combat power on the battlefield."⁴ Although we can attempt to estimate the density of battlefield combat power or the intensity of a conflict in advance, the variables are so numerous and complex, and the consequences of a miscalculation so serious, that we ought to consider most armed interventions as having within them the seeds of small wars. The adversary, besides resisting, may resist with modern weapons.

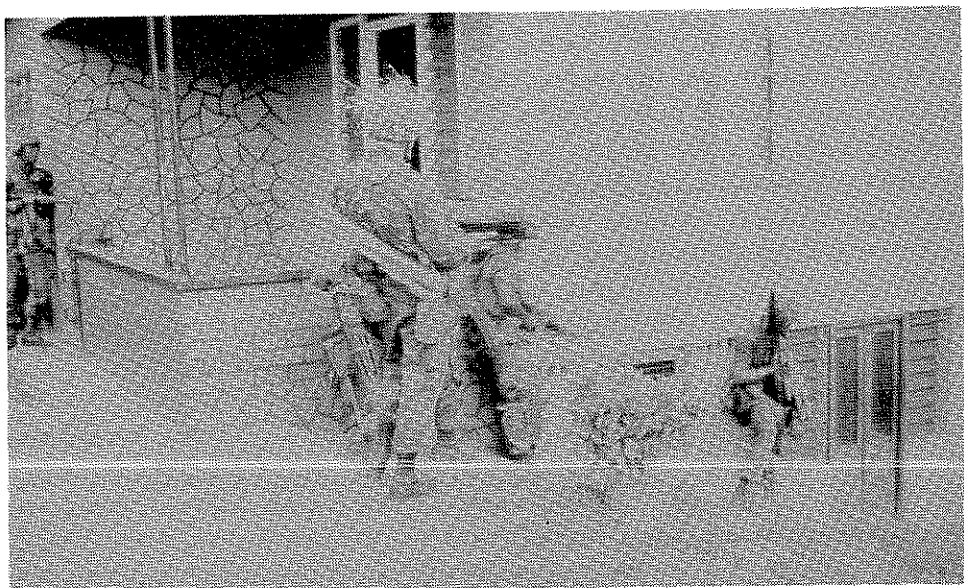
It is no exaggeration to say that many Third World nations are armed to the teeth. The armed forces of the opposition may have rocket-powered grenades, shoulder-fired or mounted anti-aircraft missiles, anti-mortar radars, sensors, sophisticated mines, rotary-wing aircraft for rapid movement and ground attack, jet aircraft with air-to-air and air-to-ground attack capability, modern naval vessels (including submarines), tanks and mechanized infantry, long-range surface-to-surface missiles, binary chemical weapons, perhaps even a few deliverable nuclear weapons, and everything else that money, credit, or promises of affiliation can buy. These high-tech threats may be complemented by an effective capability to employ low-tech weapons in small-unit or guerrilla tactics, when necessary or advantageous.

In addition to being well-armed, the enemy is increasingly likely to be well-led. Many of the leaders of Third World governments and armed forces have been educated at universities in Asia, the Middle East, or the West. Their officers may have been trained in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Libya, Lebanon, or even at military colleges in the United States. It is unlikely that the enemy troops they lead will have the one-on-one competence of our own troops, but they will probably be more familiar with the terrain, have homes and families to protect, be infused with the national pride that adds an incalculable dimension to a

warrior's capability, and be able to seize the initiative if they find us weak or unprepared. They may also have had recent combat experience in the region. What may have been envisioned as a simple show of force could result in combat with a well-armed, well-led, and vicious enemy.

Pondering where conflict might occur suggests three other characteristics of these kinds of wars: (1) strategic warning of an imminent conflict will very often not be available, since intelligence collection assets may not be optimized for the areas where conflict is likely; (2) because the site of conflict may be in a lesser-developed country, we can expect at best only a modest infrastructure to support our operations; and (3) the most significant limiting factor may be the lack of runways to support air operations. These points deserve elaboration.

Besides being denied warning, we may also know little about the enemy's center of gravity or the disposition of his forces. Depending on the adversary's language or language groups, we may not have any or enough linguists. Being unfamiliar with the operational geography of an area, we may fail to appreciate how it can be used against us. We may lack accurate charts and maps, continuous navigation satellite coverage, assured communications connectivity, and a host of other amenities. We may know less than we would prefer about terrain, water sources, trafficability, and so forth. Worse, the horrendous logistics problem associated with great distances and budget-driven sustainability cuts may be seriously compounded by the lack of ports, paved roads, and airfields.



US soldiers conduct a house-to-house search during Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada. The potential for combat in urban areas is an important characteristic of future small wars.

In lesser-developed nations, airfields are few and those existing are usually joint-use facilities shared with the civil side. A military presence at such airfields usually means troops, fortifications, and air defenses. Forced entry involving runway-seizure operations will almost inevitably require wresting fortified air bases from the enemy. Lacking airfields for sustainment is one problem, lacking bases for close air support is quite another, but lacking any easy lodgment at all may be the most serious.

These purely military inconveniences of small wars may be aggravated by the political characteristics of armed interventions. Because the quickest way to influence the will of a hostile government may be to confront the political center of gravity directly, it is likely that our forces will intervene in or near the seat of another state's government. The interventions in Libya, Lebanon, Grenada, the Dominican Republic, and Panama were all at least partially directed against capital cities. Since these are urban areas even in the Third World, should fighting erupt the likelihood of urban combat would be high. The potential for combat in urban areas, an environmental factor resulting from political considerations, is an important characteristic of future opposed interventions or small wars.

Other political constraints will affect military operations. It is national policy that we will fight only as a last resort.⁵ Thus, we could enter the fray at a tactical disadvantage. Even rapidly deployable deterrent-force modules may not be of much help if our adversary has had time to mobilize reserves, fortify high-value assets, and disperse forces.

Because of the sensitivity of interventions, we will always have precise and restrictive rules of engagement. Collateral damage of any kind may be prohibited, even in urban areas. Overflight of en route or contiguous countries may be denied. Some critical nodes in the adversary's logistical chain could be located in other countries. Ethnic, cultural, or religious considerations may cause unexpected coalitions to develop. Whatever rules of engagement we begin with may change rapidly unless we meet with quick success. The longer we are engaged, the more changeable and confusing the rules are likely to become. Likewise, other sources of pressure—from public opinion, the Congress, our own military leaders, and other actors in the world arena—will push for a war of limited objectives and limited duration.⁶ The rapid restoration of peace will always be a dominant goal.

These requirements, in turn, will condition the approach we take toward preparing for interventions that could become small wars. The foremost requirement ought to be fidelity to the principle that the military instrument of national power should be employed only when all other avenues of power and suasion have been exhausted, when political intercourse requires the addition of violence or the threat of violence to protect or secure our interests. Even before committing to a military solution, military leaders must have a clear understanding of the

political objective and the ways in which military force is envisioned to support it. The political objective and its importance will determine both the military objective and the level of effort required.

If military officers have any say in the matter, we should emphasize that our combatant forces are for combat—that is, the active neutralization and even physical destruction of the obstacles that impede the realization of our political goals. Except for military police and civil affairs teams, which remain the forces of choice at the low end of the conflict spectrum, our forces are not ideally structured or deliberately trained to be a presence or for policing. Our combat forces are trained and formed for, and should probably be employed only in, interventions that require the application of or the sincere threat of violent, lethal force. That is their principal purpose, and to use them otherwise is to misuse them.

That we should not intervene with military forces unless we intend, or are at least prepared, to employ violent force is not a profound insight, yet it may be a novel one to some involved in crisis-resolution planning. Thus, we need to ensure that everyone involved in crisis-resolution deliberations is aware of the two cardinal realities of military combat: First, if our intervening military force encounters resistance, and even if withdrawal or retreat are acceptable alternatives, there will very likely be destruction of property and loss of human life, including that of innocents. Second, in the fog and friction of combat, there will unavoidably be mistakes, misdirection, and even the potential for failure. Intervention begets violence, and violence is never subject to absolute control.

As the destruction of an Iranian airliner by the USS *Vincennes* illustrates, the death of noncombatants is an ever-present risk. The downing of a US Air Force reconnaissance jet by a missile fired from a US Navy fighter over the Mediterranean in 1988 showed that misdirection can occur whenever armed forces are in an even potentially hostile environment. The purpose of these illustrations is not to criticize our naval forces; rather, it is to question the notion that force can be applied so discriminately that it can always be precisely controlled. Although it is tempting to use adjectives like “flawless” and “surgical” to describe combat operations, these words are almost invariably inaccurate. And a military intervention planned as or unexpectedly transformed into a combat operation is as unlikely to be bloodless as it is to be flawlessly or surgically executed. All our citizens need to understand that.

They must also understand the ways in which the potentially negative effects of these realities can be minimized: (1) by refusing to mount a military intervention unless we must, (2) by ensuring that both our military forces and our citizens are prepared for the possibility that even our presence might be violently opposed, (3) by using the proper forces to intervene, (4) by ensuring superior force-on-force ratios at the critical points, and (5) should fighting erupt, by taking advantage of the combined-arms combat capabilities we

possess. By “proper forces” and “combined-arms” requirements I do not mean a collage of forces for the sake of what Jeffrey Record calls “gratuitous jointness.” We have not done that recently, unless one considers Urgent Fury in Grenada (1983) a recent event.

To increase the probability that a military intervention will be successful even if opposed, we should intervene only with the forces best prepared for combat. A dilemma we face is that the forces *best* prepared for combat may be those *least* prepared for police work or civic action, or *least* capable of causing zero collateral damage. Since a rapid response may be required, we require a highly mobile and air-transportable force. If we believe that armed resistance to an intervention is more than just a possibility, we will need forces that are both conventional and unconventional, that can get in quickly, execute violently, fight continuously day and night, be largely self-sustaining, and secure their most critical objectives in a matter of hours or days. Said another way, our military forces need to have as much of the fighting done as possible before the press pool arrives.

Why? Because the press may exercise a decisive and possibly adverse role in future armed interventions and small wars. Dr. Grant Hammond of the Air War College faculty has suggested that in a democracy the small war’s center of gravity may be public opinion, manifest not only in opinion polls, but also through the representative leadership of a democracy’s citizens.⁷ If public opinion is indeed “the hub on which all power and movement depends” and “the most effective target for a blow”—Clausewitz’s way of defining the center of gravity—then we require both a popular cause for armed intervention and the capability to reach a resolution rapidly, *before* the sight of blood and bodybags on evening TV begins to chill the national resolve.⁸ For the same reasons, we do not need American noncombatants taken hostage or American prisoners of war taken as a consequence of our intervention.

Thus, both the will and the means must be prepared as we contemplate the likelihood of future armed interventions. Once our minds and means are prepared, our leaders must carefully weigh in the balance the real gains that can be obtained through the use of lethal force—or the threat of it—with the potential costs of combat operations. This evaluation must be sensitive to our national values, and must not preclude the possibility that doing nothing may be a legitimate response to some crises. In fact, in an era of scarcity, it may be our only possible one. The conclusion that military force can best resolve a crisis must be made with great deliberation at the highest levels.

Analysis of US military fiascoes in the past decade or so—the Iranian hostage rescue attempt, the deaths of more than 200 Marines in Lebanon, and the failure of some of the specific tasks on Grenada—indicates common contributing factors.⁹ Among these were improvisational planning (Iran and Grenada), disintegrated planning (Iran, Beirut, and Grenada), questionable force

selections (Iran and Grenada), and self-induced command and control problems (Iran, Beirut, and Grenada). Present in each and contributing to the final outcomes were failures on the part of leaders—especially political leaders—to think their way through the problems associated with armed interventions.

Recalling that this essay is merely a raid, we should not classify the foregoing observations as direct attacks on leadership. If leadership takes a few hits, they fall into the category of collateral damage. The point is that all of us connected with national defense—military and civilian alike—need to ponder the many difficulties associated with armed interventions that could evolve into small wars. In the absence of such hard thought, the desired outcome of an armed intervention may not be attained, and, in the process of failing, our nation, our armed forces, and some of our citizens could be hurt.

Our raid is now over, save for the after-action report. In this case, that report is a compilation of imperatives which political and military leaders should consider before they sortie off to another nation's soil or into another nation's airspace or waters in furtherance of our country's interests in the future.

- *Clearly understand the political outcome desired.* Political leaders must precisely define and articulate the political objectives they intend to achieve by intervening with military force. Military leaders must select the courses of action that satisfy those requirements. Those of us in the trenches need not only to understand the commander's intent, we need also to understand the President's intent. In dynamic situations this understanding could predispose us to behave in ways that are more faithful to the larger design, even if explicit instructions are unavailable.

- *Envision the outcome before intervening.* Sir Isaac Newton taught us that to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. How will the enemy react? Have we realistically visualized the action-reaction cycle that will surely be set in motion by our intervention, and are we prepared to call or up the ante as the action escalates? If the outcome appears to be either an interminable intervention or one not likely to be supported by the American people, it is not going to succeed. Certainly we can admire Edmund Burke's advice: "Do not despair, but if you must, work on in despair." But we are better advised to avoid situations entirely that will lead to despair.

- *Don't go anywhere mentally or physically unprepared for combat.* Preparation includes understanding the rules of engagement and having plans for a hasty and opposed withdrawal. The rules of engagement must be reasonable and, if force is required, must not constrain it to the degree that a successful military outcome is jeopardized.

If the rules of engagement are overly restrictive or too complex for the forces to understand, they will likely be unintentionally violated. When

the rules of engagement restrict reasonable military operations, require the troops to perform tasks for which they have not been trained, or require behaviors that contradict key elements of their training, something has gone wrong. Trained combatants are just that. To require or expect philanthropic behavior from them in a potentially hostile environment is foolhardy.

- *Pray for a nice, straight chain of command.* One responsible and accountable commander and a clearly defined chain of command are infinitely superior to the collage approach to interventions, where too much is left to the vagaries of cooperation and coordination. Joint task forces and coalition warfare are the wave of the future, but these make the need for a single authoritative commander only more pronounced.

A sovereign nation requesting the assistance of our combatant forces may be unwilling to subordinate its military forces to our theater commander-in-chief or joint task force commander. Likewise, it is difficult to envision our forces being placed under the operational control of foreign military leaders outside of NATO or the Combined Forces Command in Korea. Unless we have an understanding of the command relationships that might be expected by other nations with which we have bilateral security agreements, we may be victimized by our lack of foresight. It is easy to talk about coalition warfare, but effective coalition warfare will not be possible unless we conduct these delicate discussions in advance.

- *Things change over time.* Remain sensitive to changes and continuously evaluate the situation. Do not let the “intelligence preparation of the battlefield” formula and its internally coherent templates create complacency. Things can change rapidly.

If the intention of the intervention is to apply force, the general guidelines above must be supplemented. More specifically, if the decision to fight is made, it becomes axiomatic that we marshal the right resources in the right strength to ensure that the objectives can be secured quickly and with minimum losses to friendly forces. Following from that axiom are several corollaries:

- *Use elite forces first.* The enemy fears them most and should. Elite forces include not only the service components of the Special Operations Command, but also airborne units and Marine expeditionary forces. If among the rules of engagement is the requirement for no collateral damage, it will be necessary to use only the forces capable of meeting such stringent requirements. In all cases, plan for the forced entry to occur in darkness.

- *Plan and execute an overwhelming initial assault.* Although our sense of fair play may tend to make a graduated response appear more humane and civilized, the probability of success is compounded if the enemy archers are slain and his war chariots smashed all at once. If it is human to err, it is prudent to err initially on the side of “too many.” Be prepared to explain to

critics why this is “proportional” and “humane.” Plan adequate reserves. Plan to succeed.

- *Make it easy for the enemy to quit.* Resistance requires hostile will and hostile means. Psychological operations can attack and help subdue hostile will while physical attacks eliminate hostile means. While the intent of simultaneous attacks against the enemy’s mind and muscle is to make surrender, capitulation, or withdrawal the only alternatives available to a reasonable enemy, do not count on any enemy being reasonable. Overtake and capture or destroy those withdrawing. Do not make it easy for the enemy to reconstitute his armed forces against you. If the enemy refuses to behave reasonably, destroy his forces until only reasonable men remain. Appreciate, however, that unless some national authority structure in the enemy state can be assembled after your initial objectives are met, your stay may be prolonged.

- *Talk to the enemy.* Take pains to remain in contact with the enemy’s military leaders. Make sure they harbor no doubts regarding your capability or your will. Use the media to your maximum advantage. Let the enemy leaders and troops know that you are treating noncombatants, prisoners, and wounded with compassion. Give enemy leaders at least two alternative visions of their future and explain the advantages of being alive over being dead.

- *Restore the peace as rapidly as you can.* If you have destroyed the enemy’s means and will to resist, garrison forces will not be required, at least not in large numbers. An intervention plan that lacks a vision of the post-conflict restoration—and fails to provide the people and instruments to implement it—is a poor plan.

We are well into the epoch of the small war and even lower-level military interventions. Although these may not represent the worst case, armed interventions and small wars are likely a “worse case.”¹⁰ These are probably more difficult to win than any military operations or wars in our experience. A principal source of their difficulty is that they are fought in “peacetime,” without a formal declaration of war by Congress. Consequently, they demand visionary statesmen; gifted generals; creative colonels; and well-trained, well-equipped troops.

Approaching this subject from the perspective of a raid, I have omitted much that is important, including some things that are extremely important. The logistical, medical, communications, command/control, and intelligence requirements for military interventions and small wars, for example, are as complex as they are critical, but their treatment belongs in a more general engagement than this.

Finally, if we are ever to become involved in large military interventions or small wars again—and we undoubtedly will—the understanding and support of our citizens will be crucial. Because warfighting is an activity that

engages the minds and hearts of the entire nation, it is our citizens and their elected representatives who ultimately will determine whether our military forces succeed or fail. It is for that reason the framers of the Constitution placed the responsibilities "to raise and support" our armed forces, "to provide for calling forth the militia," and "to declare war" squarely on the shoulders of the Congress, the representatives chosen by the people. In the final analysis, the role of military forces in a democracy is nothing more nor less than to fulfill the will of its citizens on the battlefield.

NOTES

1. Operation Just Cause in Panama entailed the reinforcement of treaty-protected forces and their subsequent employment in combat operations. Even air reserve components were available in the theater for immediate employment. The contingency plan was developed and matured over a long period of time. The logistical problems associated with great distances, bare bases, and lack of infrastructure did not exist. It is difficult to envision many other places in the world where our intervention forces would be given the advantages US forces in Panama had. See Douglas Waller et al., "Inside the Invasion," *Newsweek*, 25 June 1990, pp. 28-31.

2. The "Initial Draft" of Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication 3-07, *Doctrine for Joint Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, May 1989, is an ambitious work. However, it appears to be more policy than doctrine. Doctrine, for example, ought to assert the need to protect and defend existing US interests from reprisals once "peacemaking" or other coercive military operations are undertaken. Yet, a senior Marine officer (speaking under the promise of nonattribution), suggested that reinforcement of the Marine detachment at the US Embassy in Panama did not receive the priority it deserved during Just Cause planning. In sum, for doctrine to be authoritative, it must be sufficiently comprehensive and predispose us to behave in ways likely to ensure success.

3. Michael C. Desch, "The Keys that Lock Up the Third World: Identifying American Interests in the Periphery," *International Security*, 14 (Summer 1989), 86-122.

4. US Department of the Navy, Headquarters United States Marine Corps, *Fleet Marine Forces Manual 1, Warfighting*, p. 21.

5. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, July 1987, pp. 32-34, and US Congress, *Report of the Secretary of Defense Frank C. Carlucci on the FY 1990/FY 1991 Biennial Budget and the FY 1990-94 Defense Programs*, pp. 43-45. The 1987 declaration of national security strategy stated that combat forces would be introduced "only as a last resort and when vital national interests cannot otherwise be adequately protected." The White House's most recent declaration declares: "To the degree possible, we will support allied and friendly efforts rather than introduce US forces." It adds the caveat, "Nonetheless, we must retain the capability to act either in concert with our allies or, if necessary, unilaterally where our vital interests are threatened" (The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, March 1990, p. 26).

6. Eliot A. Cohen, "Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars," *International Security*, 9 (Fall 1984), 151-81.

7. Grant Hammond, paper on low-intensity conflicts in *Journal of Small Wars* (forthcoming).

8. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 485-86, 595-96.

9. Richard Gabriel, *Military Incompetence: Why the American Military Doesn't Win* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985); Daniel P. Bolger, *Americans at War, 1975-1986: An Era of Violent Peace* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988); and Arthur T. Hadley, *The Straw Giant; Triumph and Failure: America's Armed Forces* (New York: Random House, 1986).

10. As time goes on, more Third World nations will acquire chemical and biological weapons, nuclear weapons, and ballistic missiles. The "worst case" may indeed be the need for raids or strikes to disarm such nations. It is likely the worst case because such operations would be large, probably violently opposed, and not necessarily successful. Even if one such raid or strike succeeded, other similarly armed Third World nations would probably strengthen their defenses, disperse their weapons, and, having secured their weapons and delivery means, use the threat of employing these weapons as an additional deterrent against preemptive, disarming attacks.