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The Art of Strategy and Force Planning

Henry C. Bartlett, G. Paul Holman,
and Timothy E. Some

AN ANCIENT CLICHE HOLDS THAT strategy is an art, not a science. Specifically, strategy is the linking of ends and means—a “game plan” that tells how finite resources will be employed to accomplish declared objectives. Coherent strategy is the key to institutional success; it is as important for businesses and universities as it is for countries.

Force planning, like strategy, is also an art. It is the process of appraising the security needs of a nation, establishing the military requirements that result from them, and selecting, within resource constraints, military forces to meet those requirements.

Practitioners of strategy and force planning come from a wide variety of academic disciplines and professional backgrounds. Some have particular knowledge of geopolitics; others have extensive experience in economics, diplomacy, or political office. Many have spent years in operational military billets. Some are especially comfortable with abstract concepts, others prefer practicalities. The challenge is to blend this array of perspectives and approaches so as to devise the best strategies and capabilities to support a nation’s security aims.

The first half of this article presents a simple model that addresses the key variables in the art of strategy and force planning. This part stresses logical decisions about ends, means, and strategy; it identifies potential mismatches among the variables, repeating the process as necessary. The second half of the article focuses more narrowly on military force planning. It examines commonly

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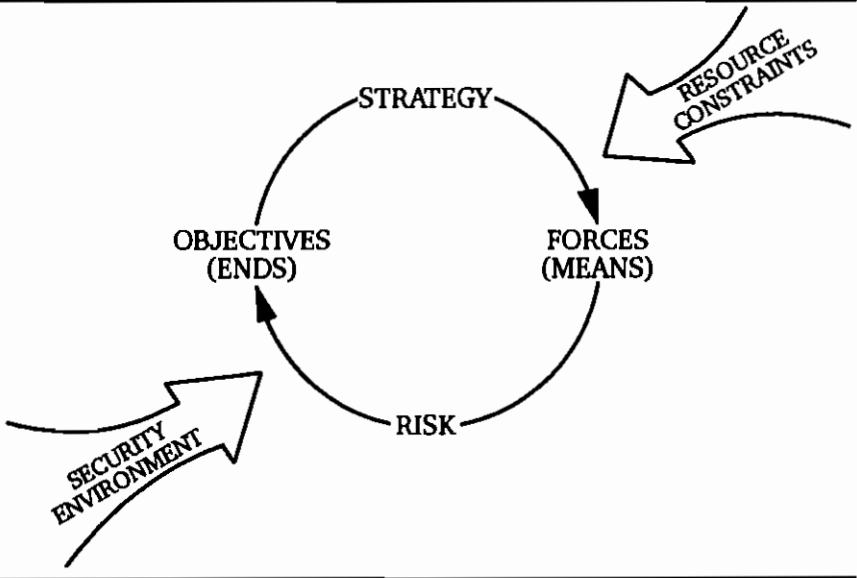
used approaches, whose strengths and weaknesses are then weighed in terms of the model.

A Model of Strategic Development

Practitioners of strategy and force planning constantly struggle to achieve a balance among many competing variables. The art of strategy and force planning is made evident by how well the inevitable tensions among these variables are resolved.

The Key Variables. The “Bartlett model” in figure 1 illustrates this dynamic process. It can be used to explore substantive controversies and to facilitate national security decision making. The model reveals the interaction among what we consider the key variables, and thereby represents a comprehensive approach to strategy development and force planning.

Figure 1
Bartlett Model



Ends and objectives. Strategists and force planners usually think in terms of levels of objectives. At the highest level are national interests, which endure over time and command broad support. The survival of the country and the health of its economy are interests that appear on any such list. Strategists also agree, by and

large, about the desirability of global peace, although they may disagree about the impact of any specific conflict on national interests. Less tangible—and as a result, more controversial—goals arise from the concern for such values as democracy and human rights.

Lower-level goals must be reconciled with these highest-level, national interests. Global objectives must be weighed against regional, and long-term goals against short-term. Assuring such consistency demands a high degree of intellectual rigor and discipline from all strategists. As examples, the U.S. commitments to preservation of open markets and freedom of the seas are long-term objectives that flow from the national interest of economic well-being. Others, such as preventing Iraq and Iran from dominating the Persian Gulf, may be more sensitive to rapid changes.

Security environment. Assessing the security environment is one of the most difficult tasks of strategists and force planners. Sudden changes in the security environment may radically alter national objectives in particular regions of the world. An assessment of the security environment should include a wide range of considerations, such as shifting international power centers, dominant trends, critical uncertainties, evolving economic interdependence, changing domestic requirements, cultural, religious, and demographic trends, ethnic warfare, ecological challenges, and advancing technology. All of these, and other considerations, are factors that determine a nation's security environment.

Strategies are often conceived as "game plans" for achieving desired goals with limited means. The art of the strategist is not only to select the best plan among alternatives but to be sure the game itself is worth playing. At the highest level of national thinking, such a game plan is often referred to as grand, or national security, strategy. It reflects the structure of international relations—not merely a country's sense of who its allies and rivals are but also its strengths, weaknesses, and the capacity of its body politic to accept challenges. Grand strategy should provide a clear concept of how economic, diplomatic, and military instruments of national power will be used to achieve national goals and policy.¹

Lower levels of strategy, for each of the major instruments of national power, are more prescriptive. An economic strategy should explain, for example, how a country intends to change its rate of growth or its role in the world marketplace. A diplomatic strategy should describe how a nation expects to implement its highest goals through communication with foreign governments, directly and in international forums. Finally, a military strategy should support the others, explaining how, and under what circumstances, the military instrument of national power will be used to achieve influence, deterrence, defense, or compellance.

The *means or tools* available to execute the chosen strategy comprise, theoretically, the total resources of the country. In practice, however, strategists and

force planners usually think in terms of three basic sets of tools. The economic instruments of national power include trade agreements, foreign aid, the money supply, taxes, government expenditures, subsidies, and sanctions. Among the diplomatic means are alignments, alliances, ad hoc coalitions, treaties, good offices, and negotiations of every conceivable kind and complexity. Military instruments include the full array of armed might, from the capabilities for nuclear war and large-scale conventional war to nation building. The changing world security environment will alter the relative utility of these instruments and will add others. Different instruments of power already affect international and domestic arenas. Some authorities would emphasize psychology—which reflects the ability of national leaders to use the “bully pulpit” to dominate the communications media, and thus to mobilize public opinion at home and abroad. Still others include technological, informational, environmental, social, cultural, ethnic, and other forms of interaction and influence. Strategists must not overlook these additional varieties of influence.

Constrained resources. Wants almost always exceed *resources*, for governments as well as individuals. Any country must choose among rival demands and mutually exclusive alternatives. The armed forces compete for resources against many other government agencies, against nongovernmental demands, and against each other, especially when a democratic country is at peace. As a result, strategy and force planning entail resource allocation, deciding which objectives and courses of action are most important, and setting priorities.

Risk of failure. Uncertainty is the dominant characteristic of the international and domestic security environments. As a result, strategists and force planners must weigh their hopes for success against the possibility of failure. They do so by reexamining the security environment, goals, strategies, available resources, and tools needed to achieve stated objectives. This is a continuous, iterative process. Perhaps the single most important value of risk assessment is that it results in a constant effort to identify and correct imbalances among the key variables. Strategists, for instance, tend to focus on ends-means mismatches, as generally befits their concern that national objectives not become too ambitious for the resources available. Force planners tend to emphasize strategy-force incongruities, hoping to ensure that the level and mix of future forces will in fact adequately support a given military strategy.

Realigning the Key Variables. As strategists and force planners consider the twenty-first century, they face a constant need to adjust their thinking. The model suggests that a change in one variable will usually result in the modification of others, and accordingly in mismatches. To restore the balance, strategists and planners must be ready to realign the key variables. There are a number of ways of doing so.

Modify the ends. In a rational world, strategists would first assess the international security environment in terms of shifting power centers, dominant trends, and critical uncertainties; then they would articulate specific national ends or objectives. Thus the most logical place to begin correcting a mismatch between the security environment and the means is to reconsider the national ends.

Change the means. Political alterations may generate substantial changes in the means available. Such changes are sometimes quantitative; the Korean War, for instance, caused large increases in U.S. defense spending beginning in 1950, while the collapse of the Soviet Union has prompted sharp declines. A qualitative change in means may necessitate shifting priority from some instruments of national power to others. Consider two illustrations of an adjustment in means precipitated by the recent change in the security environment. First, many observers believe that in an interdependent world economic tools for achieving national objectives have become more effective than military ones, so greater attention must be paid to the strategic use of tools such as boycotts, most-favored-nation status, free-trade agreements, and technological advantage. Second, in both of the post-Cold War efforts to adjust the military means to the security environment (the Cheney-Powell "Base Force" and the 1993 "Bottom-Up Review"), the means were adjusted before a new military strategy was fully developed.²

Revise the strategy. Containment, the grand strategy that guided the West through the Cold War, is no longer applicable. Replacing it has been difficult. Some favor a strategy of collective security, with broad reliance on international institutions such as the United Nations. Others advocate a strategy of selective engagement, focusing more narrowly on critical threats to U.S. national interests. Whatever the ultimate result, such a shift in U.S. strategy will have major implications for all the other variables. In theory, there are many possible ways to achieve any given objective with the resources available; the strategist must pick the best one.

Reevaluate the risk of failure. It is inevitable that national security analysts will disagree about the risks. As an example, a planner assuming that National Guard brigades can be activated and fully trained in a short period of time will see little risk in reducing active-duty units; a colleague who rejects that assumption will be uneasy about such cuts. Another source of discomfort is the potential for "war stoppers," obstacles that make impossible a vital course of action. For example, over the coming decade logistical constraints could well frustrate otherwise brilliant plans and strategies. Finally, the degree of confidence also depends crucially on the nature of the threats and the national interests at stake. Weapons of mass destruction, for example, tend to create greater levels of anxiety than terrorism or conventional conflict. Such examples suggest that risk, as used in

this model, cannot be quantified; rather, it is the "comfort level" that senior planners experience as they assess the key variables.

Alternative Approaches to Force Planning

Although the Bartlett model provides a structure for examining national security, practitioners routinely approach force planning and strategic development from different perspectives. Each approach accentuates one variable or aspect at the expense of others. These alternatives have evolved over the years and are given different relative emphasis in different sectors of the national security assessment and decision-making process.

Top-Down. National interests and objectives "drive" the "top-down" approach to force planning; it, in turn, focuses principally on a nation's grand or national security strategy. This approach is strongly hierarchical, dominated by a downward flow of key documents through successive levels of decision making. A top-down approach has several strengths. First, it helps strategists and force planners concentrate on ends. Second, it provides a systematic way to think through requirements from a broad, or "macro," perspective. Third, it emphasizes the relationship among the supporting instruments of national power—economic, political, and military—each of which requires its own strategy for achieving the higher-level goals.

Finally, a great virtue of the top-down approach is that strategies can be broken down into sets of key "descriptors." If rightly selected, these are more than mere labels or slogans. They should crystallize *how* the strategy will be executed, using only a few words that are as precise and crisp as possible. Higher-level descriptors should serve as criteria for lower-level choices, strategies, and evaluations of force structure, all of which then create lower-level descriptors. For example, the 1994 National Security Strategy made effective use of two important descriptors: Engagement and Enlargement. They were chosen to replace the Cold War descriptor of Containment, and they reflected months of intense debates within the administration.

Whether or not one agrees with that strategy and these descriptors, they provided guidance on how national security objectives would be achieved. The 1994 National Security Strategy declared that the "three central components" (which we would call descriptors) of the strategy of Engagement and Enlargement were: "maintaining a strong defense capability and promoting cooperative security"; to "open foreign markets and spur economic growth"; and "promotion of democracy abroad." For the purposes of military strategists and force planners, "maintaining a strong defense capability" led to such lower-level descriptors as "Credible Overseas Presence," "Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction," "Contributing to Multilateral Peace Operations," "Supporting

Counterterrorism Efforts,” and maintaining forces “sufficient to help defeat aggression in two nearly simultaneous regional conflicts.”³ The challenge to the force planner is then to craft a force structure that will support these descriptors.

There are certain pitfalls associated with this approach. First, it generally considers possible constraints only late in the planning process. Consequently, when dollar, technological, or other limits are applied, the distance between desires and constraints is likely to be so great that major adjustments among the ends and means become necessary. A second concern is rigidity; because this approach is hierarchical, it can lead lower-level planners to take for granted the validity of higher-level objectives and strategy—even when they deserve to be challenged. A final problem is the degree of openness, or public awareness, of national security strategies. On the one hand, public exposure and debate are essential for achieving consensus and support in a democracy; they are even legally mandated by the Congress. Yet at the same time, specific details may be so sensitive that, for reasons of security, they cannot be publicly stated.

Bottom-Up. Existing military capability drives the “bottom-up” approach to force planning.⁴ It tends to emphasize improving existing capabilities and weapon systems, with particular regard to current operational issues. It is related to military operational planning, since both concepts use current force structure as a basic reference; however, the differences between them are important. The matrix of table 1 shows how force planning and operational planning interrelate.

A major advantage of the bottom-up approach is that it emphasizes the “real” world. Strategists and planners are compelled to focus on how potential adversaries can be handled with existing forces; doing so militates against presuming future capabilities that may never materialize. Focusing on current capability can also improve strategies and operational plans. On the other hand, too much emphasis on a bottom-up approach can result in neglect of the future and may frustrate long-term goals or creativity. Another pitfall is a tendency to lose sight of the “big picture”; local or theater considerations may be allowed to dominate when an integrated global view is required.

Scenario. The “scenario” approach to force planning is situationally driven. The planner starts with a well defined set of conditions at the national, theater, regional, or global level and then postulates a problem or crisis. A fully developed scenario usually combines a large amount of current, real-world information with elements or assumptions of established plans. These frequently include warning and mobilization times, force levels, and, where appropriate, military campaign intentions.

The scenario approach has three clear strengths. The first is its specific and tangible focus. If the scenario is a conventional Iraqi attack against Kuwait, fairly precise planning can be undertaken once major assumptions are made. If simultaneous scenarios are anticipated, such as Korea and Iraq, even more specific

Table 1
Force Planning Compared to Operational Planning

Criteria	Force Planning	Operational Planning
Purpose	Structuring Forces	Fighting Forces
Orientation	Global/Regional	Theater/Local
Input	Future: Forces Threats Objectives Strategies Risk of Failure	Existing: Forces Threats Objectives Strategies Risk of Failure
Output	Planned and Programmed Forces	Contingency/ War Plans
Biases	Development Modernization Force Structure Research & Development	Deployment Employment Readiness Sustainability

planning can result. A further advantage is that it encourages clear priorities; national interests dictate that some regions, theaters, or countries be considered more important than others. A third strength is the dynamic nature of a scenario, in which events are sequential and time lines are specified. However, there are limitations to this approach. The world rarely conforms to a planner's expectations. Also, scenarios tend to take on a life of their own; after all the work involved in planning them, there is a natural reluctance to challenge their basic rationales. Thus such key assumptions as warning times and mobilization rates may become absolutes, and hypotheses about enemy doctrine may be treated as facts. Finally, scenarios tend to be retrospective, reliving old crises rather than exploring new challenges.

Threat. The "threat" approach involves identifying potential opponents and assessing their capabilities. The point of departure is often an assessment of the balance of capabilities between adversaries. Recent changes in the security environment make the threat approach to force planning more difficult than during the Cold War. It does, however, have three strengths, the most important being that it keeps the focus on potential adversaries. Secondly, it considers both the "macro" level, of the global balance of power, and the "micro" level, of specific conflict situations. Finally, the threat approach reminds both strategists and force planners that military capabilities do count in warfare; it requires them to consider serious assessments and devise realistic scenarios.

Of its pitfalls, the most prominent is the difficulty of determining what constitutes a valid threat. Perhaps no other single aspect of the art of the strategist and force planner is more controversial. To deal with this challenge, other terms

(such as “danger,” employed in the *Bottom-Up Review*) have sometimes been used. Threat-based planning is inherently reactive, and analysts may have grave difficulty adapting to sudden changes in the international environment. An additional problem of the threat-driven technique lies in its bias toward quantitative data, such as numbers of people, units of energy, or types and quantities of weapon systems. These figures can be misleading in terms of overall unit or weapon system combat power, and this tendency may result in overlooking, underrating, or overestimating important qualitative factors such as experience, leadership, morale, or strategy. A related weakness is a superficial accounting of military force; any war is an extraordinarily complex interaction of people, equipment, and organizations, but threat assessments often employ simplistic numerical comparisons such as tank-versus-tank or tanks-versus-antitank weapons.

Mission. The “mission” approach is functionally based, examining the capabilities of friendly forces irrespective of plausible threats or of crisis or combat conditions. The force planner starts with such broad categories of military activities as strategic deterrence, power projection, or overseas presence. These categories may then be broken down into more specific activities, such as joint strike, air superiority, strategic mobility, sea control, and ground maneuver. Even more specific mission subsets might be suppression of enemy air defenses, counter-battery artillery fire, and mine countermeasures. This approach provides a way of looking at capabilities across general categories of wartime activity.

The mission approach has a number of advantages. First, it fosters realistic and detailed appraisal of the capabilities of any military organization, which is especially useful with respect to future threats, since it allows friendly forces to maximize their strengths and exploit enemy weaknesses in advance. Even if no threat can be identified, this approach allows force planners to set priorities and correct apparent imbalances. The primary shortcoming of the mission approach is a tendency toward suboptimization. Higher-level goals may be ignored and more creative ways of fighting dismissed through institutional inertia or infatuation with traditional warfare specialties.

Hedging. The idea here is to prepare fully (indeed, over-prepare) for any conceivable tasking of military force. This technique seeks redundancy of systems, anticipates a wide range of employment options, and demands a balanced force, i.e., one that can deal with a wide range of contingencies. Different countries facing diverse threats will hedge their strategies and force structures in different ways. The U.S. tends to hedge its force structure by providing for capabilities across the entire spectrum of conflict, from humanitarian assistance operations to global nuclear war.

An emphasis on hedging has merit in that it directly confronts uncertainty about the future. History provides examples of forces tailored for specific purposes that were overcome by unforeseen events. Consequently, hedging seeks to assure both balance and flexibility. On the other hand, it tends to understate friendly strengths, exaggerate the capabilities and the hostility of potential rivals, and thus drive planners toward worst-case scenarios. Its biggest fault, not surprisingly, is that its recommendations are very costly.

Technology. The “technology” emphasis rests upon the belief that conflict can best be deterred and aggression stopped by fielding systems superior to those of potential enemies. The Manhattan Project of World War II, the post-Vietnam War development of precision-guided munitions, and current enthusiasm for “information warfare” all illustrate the technological optimism of U.S. strategists and force planners. The greatest advantage of this approach is that it capitalizes on knowledge and individual creativity, basic strengths of a post-industrial economy. Moreover, it offers the potential of saving lives and reducing casualties. Finally, skillful development of advanced technology may provide significant military leverage (that is, a “force multiplier” or “force enhancer”).

There are, nonetheless, definite pitfalls. One is the risk of paying too much money for too small a gain, especially once a technology matures. The opposite problem is that huge investments are required to achieve revolutionary breakthroughs but do not guarantee such successes. Even when development is successful, the technological approach often leads to a dramatically smaller force of much costlier platforms. For all these reasons, it may channel too great a proportion of defense resources into too few, overly specialized programs at the expense of balance, and flexibility, and greater numbers.

Fiscal. The “fiscal” approach is driven by the budget. Overall dollar constraints are fixed at the outset by such nonmilitary considerations as some maximum permissible percentage of Gross Domestic Product, the exigencies of deficit reduction, or the demands of other sectors of the federal budget (e.g., entitlements). The strength of the fiscal approach is that it supports the democratic process—that is, it specifies defense resources in light of the overall economy, competing national requirements, and public perceptions of the security environment. It also requires planners to set priorities, thus avoiding unconstrained thinking and fostering fiscal discipline both within and among a nation’s armed services. A major weakness is that the fiscal approach may not reflect the international security environment, resulting in a significant lag between military capabilities and emerging threats. Secondly, reassessment of threats to national interests—which happens regularly in a democratic country—tends to worsen the cyclical character of defense spending, which frustrates rational long-term planning. At its worst, this

technique may lead to the unwise retention of a traditional “fair share” apportionment of funds among the services and defense agencies rather than an integrated and rational allocation that takes account of the greatly changed security situation. Thus it may worsen the potential for interservice rivalry and suboptimization.

Practitioners of strategy and force planning should be sensitive to the strengths and pitfalls of each of these approaches. The various planning focuses tend to produce different solutions and choices. Awareness of these differences can help strategists and planners stay in touch with reality. Table 2 summarizes these alternatives, what drives them, and their strengths and pitfalls.

A Challenging Art

The primary purpose of this article has been to provide a simple but powerful tool (the Bartlett model) to help students of strategy and force planning. There are many strengths to the model: its very simplicity makes it easy to remember; it focuses on the most important variables and helps in their analysis; and, finally, it stresses the iterative nature of the national security decision making process. The second purpose has been to consider some of the approaches to strategy and force planning actually used by practitioners. Each was taken in isolation to make clear its individual merits and limitations. However, during an actual planning cycle several or all of the approaches would probably be used to arrive at decisions. To use this model and these approaches wisely can constitute a real and challenging art.

Finally, the article has argued that strategists and force planners must keep in mind a number of practical principles:

- Collect professional judgment as a crucial ingredient in the decision-making process;
 - Integrate a full range of strategic perspectives and meld force planning approaches;
 - Identify key strategy and force planning “descriptors” to crystallize major goals;
 - Select the best solution, considering economic, political, and military tools of national power;
 - Set priorities, resolve conflicting demands upon resources, and eliminate mismatches;
 - Contemplate the risk of failure and the actions that would then be required;
- and,
- Be sure that the game is worth playing at all.

Table 2
Summary of Alternatives

Approaches	"Drivers"	Strengths	Pitfalls
Top-Down	Interests/ Objectives/ Strategies	Concentrates on ends Systematic (macro view) Integrates tools of power	Ignores constraints too long Fear of challenging higher levels Public awareness of strategy
Bottom-Up	Current military capability	Emphasizes real world Helps improve current war plans	Neglects future Loses big picture
Scenario	Situation/ Circumstances	Specific focus Encourages priorities Dynamic—handles time well	World is unpredictable Takes on life of its own Tends to be retrospective
Threat	Opponents	Focus on future Macro and micro balance of power Emphasizes military capability	Too simplistic Adapts poorly to sudden change Inherently retrospective Biased by quantitative data
Mission	Function	Realistic appraisal of capabilities Sets priorities	Tendency toward suboptimization May ignore higher goals
Hedging	Minimizing risk	Confronts uncertainty Assures balance and flexibility	Understates friendly strengths Exaggerates rivals' capabilities Worst-case scenarios/high cost
Technology	Superior systems	Stresses knowledge and creativity Saves lives and cuts casualties Force multiplier	Often costly for small gain High risk Works against balanced forces
Fiscal	Budget	Supports democratic process Requires setting priorities	May not reflect security environment Worsens cyclical spending Leads to "fair sharing"

That strategy and force planning is an art is a fact worth remembering. It implies that students, practitioners, and critics should recognize that there is more than one approach to formulating strategy and making decisions about future military force structure. Secondly, it underscores the fact that different approaches may lead to alternative solutions. The authors are convinced that using

the Bartlett model and the other ideas described in this article will lead to better national security strategies, plans, decisions, and force choices.

Notes

1. For the most recent edition, see William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington: The White House, July 1994).

2. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney stated in his *Annual Report to the President and the Congress, January 1991*, "Force reductions were begun in FY [fiscal year] 1990-1991 and will continue during the Department's multiyear defense program. Projected force structure reductions from FY 1990 to FY 1995 include a drop in Army divisions from 28 (18 active) to 18 (12 active), and a drop in Air Force tactical fighter wing equivalents from 36 (24 in the active component) to 26 (15 active). Battle force ships will be reduced to 451, compared to the old goal of 600 ships." (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off. [hereafter GPO], 1991, p. ix). This force structure was called the "Base Force." The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, did not issue the supporting *National Military Strategy* until a year later, in January 1992. Moving away from the Cold War stress on a global strategy, it shifted to a "regionally oriented" strategy. It declared that "this new strategy is built upon the four key foundations of the National Defense Strategy: Strategic Deterrence and Defense, Forward Presence, Crisis Response, and Reconstitution" (p. 6, and Powell's introduction). For the final details of the Base Force see Cheney's *Annual Report to the President and the Congress, February 1992* (Washington: GPO, 1992), pp. vii and 1.

The "Bottom-Up Review" (BUR) was a product of the new Clinton administration. It further reduced the force structure to 10 active Army divisions (37 National Guard brigades—15 with enhanced readiness), 13 active Air Force wings (7 reserve wings), and 346 Navy ships by FY 1999. The initial concepts underlying this force structure appeared in Les Aspin, Secretary of Defense, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review* (Washington: Department of Defense, October 1993). It briefly sketched a strategy "to win two major regional conflicts that occur nearly simultaneously." More specific numbers for the BUR force structure appeared in Les Aspin, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress, January 1994* (Washington: GPO, 1994), p. 27. However, a fully developed National Military Strategy of the United States (signed by the Chairman of the JCS) was late in coming.

3. Clinton, pp. 2, and 6-7.

4. The reader will notice that we use the term "bottom-up" in a different sense than did the BUR. We would characterize the BUR as a combination of "threat" and "scenario" approaches to force planning.

Ψ

Errata

An editorial error in our Winter 1995 issue produced both a misstatement and a misspelling in a single sentence in James L. George's review of Bennett Ramberg's Arms Control Without Negotiations. The reference to Rose Gottemoeller on page 137, right column, should read ". . . formerly of RAND, now on the National Security Council staff."

Also, William Gilkerson, the artist whose painting appeared on our Winter 1995 cover, is not (as stated on page 72 of that issue) a Canadian citizen but an American, residing in Nova Scotia.