



FIGHTING THE “GOOD FIGHT”: An Alternative to Current Democratic Proposals

For a New National Security Strategy

William D. Hartung, Director, Arms Trade Resource Center, World Policy Institute

By now, the flaws in the Bush administration’s national security policy are clear. From the debacle of “preemptive war” in Iraq, to the abuses of human rights at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, to secret domestic wiretapping, there is ample room for criticism of the administration’s post-9/11 policies.¹ Add to this the Bush administration’s disdain for international agreements, and you have a policy with immense human, economic, and diplomatic costs and repercussions that may take years to recover from.

Unfortunately, the serious failures of the Bush Administration’s foreign policy have not led to the development of substantive or bold alternative proposals from key leaders in the Democratic Party. While some Democratic proposals have contained potential improvements at the margins of U.S. security policy, none seem to address or challenge the fundamental assumptions underlying the Bush policy.

For example, the “Real Security” policy document released on March 29, 2006 with the endorsement of Senate Minority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and House Minority leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) makes a number of useful suggestions while dodging the most important issues.² Positive elements of the plan include a call for accelerating efforts to “[s]ecure loose nuclear materials that terrorists could use to build nuclear weapons or ‘dirty bombs’.” Amazingly enough, despite all of its talk about stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, the Bush Administration has failed to increase funding for this purpose, and even tried to cut it in the wake of September 11th.

Another positive element of the Real Security plan is a pledge to promote energy efficiency and alternative fuels. The menu of new sources cited in the document is broad, ranging from bio-fuels to clean coal to solar and wind energy and demonstrates a commitment to investing in technologies and markets that will allow the country to reduce its “addiction to oil” in cost-effective, environmentally sound ways.

¹ Although the Bush administration refers to “preemptive” war in its major documents, it has actually engaged in preventive war. Preemption implies an immediate security threat, which decidedly did not exist in the case of war with Iraq. Rather, it was a preventive war designed to head off an alleged threat that might occur at some point in the future. For a more detailed discussion of this concept, its history, and its role in current U.S. policy, see William W. Keller and Gordon R. Mitchell, editors, Hitting First: Preventive Force in U.S. Security Policy (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

² “Real Security: The Democratic Plan to Protect America and Restore Our Leadership in the World,” www.democrats.gov, March 29, 2006.

Aside from these two planks, this official Democratic security platform contains much to criticize. It speaks naively of a commitment to “[e]liminate Osama Bin Laden” and “destroy terrorist networks like Al Qaeda.” This tough talk is not backed up with any indication of *how* this will be done, nor does it entail any recognition that Al Qaeda is a “network of networks” that can operate with or without Osama Bin Laden.

The most objectionable element of the Democratic plan is the implication that it may be necessary to *increase* military spending beyond the levels already reached during the Bush buildup. With the regular military budget weighing in at \$440 billion per year, plus another \$140 to \$150 billion in so-called emergency spending on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. military spending is weighing in at nearly \$600 billion per year, an amount far higher than the peak levels reached during the Reagan buildup or the Vietnam War. Despite this ample funding, the Democratic document speaks of the need to “rebuild a state-of-the-art military by making needed investments in equipment and manpower so that we can project power to protect America wherever and whenever necessary.”

Real Security makes no mention of cuts in *unnneeded* Cold War era weapons systems like the F-22 fighter plane, the Virginia class attack submarine, the Osprey aircraft, and a number of other major systems that were designed to address projected Soviet capabilities that no longer exist. A more logical approach would be to finance both military and non-military programs that are more likely to achieve the stated or desired policy aims -- from the tens of billions in annual savings to be garnered from cutting unnecessary weapons programs. Moreover, the “cover the globe” military strategy which implies the need to get anywhere in the world quickly and defeat adversaries with or without allies should be abandoned. Indeed, the Iraq war offers a cautionary tale about this open-ended, military-dominated approach to security.

There are other “sins of omission” in the Democratic strategy. There is no discussion of further reductions in the U.S. arsenal of nuclear overkill, which now stands at 10,000 strategic warheads, over 5,700 of which are on active status. There is no position taken on the ill-considered U.S.-India nuclear deal, which threatens to eviscerate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by offering nuclear technology to a non-signatory of the treaty on terms far more generous than those available to nations participating in the NPT. There is no suggestion that the Democrats would renounce the use of force or the threat of “regime change” as part of deals with Iran and North Korea over their nuclear programs. In fact, William Perry, who served as Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration and later played a key role in negotiations with North Korea, called for military strikes against a North Korean *test* of a ballistic missile that occurred in the summer of 2006.³

There is also no indication that a Democratic security policy would cut back the costly, unworkable missile defense program, which is now running at \$9 to \$10 billion per year and has consumed over \$130 billion of taxpayer money since Ronald Reagan’s 1983 “Star Wars” speech.

Action on all of these fronts would put the U.S. in a better position to persuade other nations to put aside their nascent nuclear weapons programs.

Peter Beinart’s ‘Good Fight’

³ Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, “If Necessary, Strike and Destroy; North Korea Cannot Be Allowed to Test This Missile,” Washington Post, June 22, 2006; for a response, see Charles L. “Jack” Pritchard, “No, Don’t Blow It Up; A Saner Approach to a North Korean Missile Test,” Washington Post, June 23, 2006.

A proposal that has received far more attention than the official Democratic position is contained in Peter Beinart's The Good Fight: Why Liberals – and Only Liberals – Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again. His book has been embraced by Democratic stalwarts such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Madeleine Albright. Beinart's piece has many positive elements, but they are more than offset by his messianic pursuit of the notion of restoring "American greatness," by force if necessary.

Among Beinart's most constructive themes is the need to work closely with allies and international institutions in cases of military intervention and nation building – an approach that is a polar opposite of the Bush administration's approach to its intervention in Iraq. He also makes a critical point in noting that American success abroad requires the pursuit of justice at home.

Where Beinart's thesis goes astray is in his advocacy of open-ended U.S. intervention to stabilize 'failed states.' The breadth of Beinart's proposed mission for the U.S. military is stunning:

"It would be naïve . . . to think that freedom, even broadly defined . . . is enough to defeat jihadism. When governments lose control of their territory, unleashing threats that spill beyond their borders, no amount of investment or aid will help unless someone re-establishes order. Most of the time, that someone will be the government, bolstered by outside help. But some governments cannot reassert control and others are themselves the root of the problem. From the Middle East to South Asia, from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel, the United States may need to enter stateless zones, capture or kill the jihadists taking refuge there, and stay long enough to begin rebuilding the state."⁴

After four years and nearly \$300 billion spent in Iraq – a war which Beinart supported – one is hard-pressed to know when the "beginning of the rebuilding of the state" will have been accomplished in any given intervention. Even with the assistance of the United Nations, NATO, and other key allies, these exercises in nation-building are likely to be costly, difficult, and uncertain in their outcomes. What is needed is a new approach to assisting and enabling citizens of failed states and repressive regimes to attain the basic human rights they will need to change their own governments. This may be a slow, frustrating approach, but it is far preferable to a policy of attempting to spread democracy and stability through the barrel of a gun.

The logical concomitant to Beinart's ambitious military agenda is a stable or growing military budget. He argues that "when liberals casually urge cutting the defense budget, although military spending made possible American interventions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, they are succumbing to the old siren song of purity and abdicating their responsibility to do what [Reinhold] Niebuhr urged: make the tragic choices that defending freedom requires."⁵ This approach leaves no room for eliminating wasteful or unnecessary programs *within* the military budget, and seems to embrace the dubious proposition that a certain dollar amount devoted to defense is the only appropriate measure of current and future effectiveness.

⁴ Peter Beinart, The Good Fight: Why Liberals – and Only Liberals – Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), p. 196.

⁵ Beinart, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

Beinart's support for high Pentagon budgets can be deduced not only from his military agenda, but also from his ideology. He has simplistically divided the Democratic elite into "anti-totalitarian liberals" and "anti-imperialists." In his view, it is only the anti-totalitarian liberals who recognize the threat to America's existence posed by Islamic jihadists, and that we therefore must spend and do whatever it takes to "win."

Unfortunately, his view of the problem is tilted towards a monolithic view of the "jihadist threat" that in many ways parallels the monolithic view of the communist threat that led United States foreign policy in so many counterproductive directions during the Cold War era, from the Bay of Pigs invasion to the Vietnam War.

Beinart's view of jihadism as a cohesive totalitarian movement misses the critical fact that Al Qaeda and its imitators do *not* form a unified movement. Therefore his prescription for "capturing and killing jihadists" in failed states and then engaging in the beginnings of nation-building runs the risk of major miscalculations that could be immensely costly. As George Packer has noted, an effective approach to combating terrorism requires specific knowledge of each of the nations and groups involved, not the blanket approach that Beinart seems to be suggesting.⁶ It's not a question of *whether* to use force, but how to do so judiciously, in cases where it can make a difference.

"WITH ALL OUR MIGHT": THE PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE?

In its book *With All Our Might: A Progressive Strategy for Defeating Jihadism and Defending Liberty* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) – the research arm of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) – has produced the most comprehensive set of proposals to date for reforming U.S. military strategy.

The PPI's analysis shares Peter Beinart's call for a "muscular liberalism" in the tradition of Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and, in their view, Bill Clinton. It also calls for a "bigger and better military," without any real clarity about what this larger military should be used for, other than reducing the public opinion gap that has historically favored Republicans over Democrats in matters of national security.⁷

⁶ George Packer, "Fighting Faiths: Can Liberal Internationalism Be Saved?," *The New Yorker*, issue of July 10/17th, 2006. To give the flavor of Packer's critique, the following excerpt may be useful: "Ultimately, the Cold War analogy is unhelpful, because it allows Americans to make a virtue of our ignorance. Beinart is one of those bright young journalists who have spent their lives in top notch universities and Washington political circles rather than in places where jihad is more than just a word. Islamism is far stranger to us than Communism. It requires a deeper, subtler knowledge of local realities around the Muslim world, in all their variety, than most American writers and politicians have shown. The policymakers of the Kennedy era overlooked the essentially nationalist nature of Vietnamese Communism because they were swept up in the binary thinking of Kennedy's call to "pay any price, bear any burden." How much less do today's policymakers know about the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the factions vying within the Arab Gulf states, the Muslim minorities in Europe, the configuration of power in Iran, the causes of the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan, the Islamist takeover in Mogadishu, or the rising terrorist threat in Bangladesh? The grand, overarching "narrative" of antitotalitarianism that Beinart offers can't explain the different kinds of trouble that America faces in a chaotic world. It substitutes will for understanding, which is just as dangerous as the reverse—if the Iraq war has taught us anything, it should be that."

⁷ Will Marshall, editor, *With All Our Might: A Progressive Policy for Defeating Jihadism and Defending Liberty* (London, Routledge, 2006), pp. 6, 9, 13, 54.

That being said, the DLC analysis contains some excellent ideas for expanding non-military forms of engagement. Even more impressive, and contrary to most approaches, the DLC/PPI plan puts forward a mechanism for funding its ideas, by reversing a substantial portion of the Bush administration's tax cuts.

One set of proposals has to do with ways to counter extremist, jihadist ideology with programs and projects that can build bridges between the West and moderate Muslims. Reza Aslan suggests tapping into a great underutilized resource – the leaders of America's Muslim community -- to draft a list of initiatives designed to present the United States in a positive but realistic light in countries like Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Rather than sending Karen Hughes or another U.S. official with an embarrassing lack of knowledge of the Middle East and South Asia to be the U.S. "envoy" for public diplomacy, it makes eminent good sense to draw upon the ideas of émigrés who know the region and, in many cases, still have ties there. Another of Aslan's suggestions is "engaging moderate Muslim groups, foundations, parties, and individuals to promote shared values like human rights, pluralism, the rule of law and democracy" as a way for the U.S. to "play an active role in facilitating the development of an effective ideological counterweight to jihadism."⁸

This "people-to-people" approach, involving exchanges between both elites and grassroots individuals and organizations from the U.S. and Muslim countries, may be the best hope – at least on the level of public diplomacy – for stemming the tide of anti-U.S. sentiment in Muslim societies.

The DLC/PPI approach also includes a number of other common sense defensive measures, from increasing homeland security funding and focus to address high risk targets like chemical plants, to implementing a multi-pronged effort to reduce the risks of nuclear terrorism by securing and destroying loose nuclear weapons and nuclear materials. These are practical preventive measures that have little to do with using military force.

Perhaps the weakest element of the PPI strategy is its approach to military transformation. The proposed military strategy is organized around a three-part military force, one to "prevent," one to "defeat," and one to "rebuild" in the wake of conflict.

The first problem with this approach is that "prevention" is described in purely military terms, as in "striking terrorist camps or training cells" on foreign soil; "destroying weapons of mass destruction . . . and the means to produce them in rogue states"; and "preempting aggression against an ally or area of great economic importance to the United States."⁹ It also ignores the possible synergies between non-military tools of conflict prevention and military action.

There are also cases where diplomacy is so clearly the preferred route that military force should virtually be ruled out, or at most used as a threat to back up diplomacy. A perfect example of this is the doctrine of counterproliferation, which implies using military or other coercive means to prevent the spread of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, or to destroy these weapons when adversaries have capabilities or stockpiles of these deadly items. There are few if any examples of successful counter-proliferation; even the 1981 Israeli attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor is the subject of a lively debate as to whether it set back or accelerated Iraq's quest for nuclear weapons. On the other hand, diplomacy has a track record of success in eliminating nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons programs in South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Libya, the Ukraine, Belarus, and

⁸ With All Our Might, op. cit., p. 29.

⁹ James R. Blaker and Steven J. Nider, "Fighting Unconventional Wars," op. cit., note 6, pp. 134-135.

Kazakhstan. Given the proper mix of incentives (including security guarantees that the United States will not attack the nation in question), the nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran can and should be dealt with through diplomatic measures as well.

PREVENTION, NOT INTERVENTION: A PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVE

The first priority for any new approach to defense is to broaden the definition of security to include all threats to human life, whether they stem from terrorism, disease, environmental degradation, natural disasters, or entrenched poverty. This concept of security as “protection” makes it clearer that the military is only one of many tools that can be used to address today’s most urgent threats, and in many cases the least appropriate of the instruments available. This is not to suggest that U.S. military capabilities should be allowed to atrophy, but rather that they should be focused on problems with military solutions. In this scenario, strength should not necessarily be equated with more defense dollars, but with the application of the right tools to the right problems.

An example of this approach is the Unified Security Budget (USB), the product of a task force of non-governmental policy analysts that includes former government officials who have served in the Pentagon, the Congress, and the uniformed military. The most recent task force report proposes a “security shift” that involves \$62 billion in cuts from current military programs and \$52 billion in investments in non-military tools of security. Proposed military cuts include Cold War era systems with no clear missions in the new security environment, including the F-22 Raptor fighter plane, at a savings of \$2 billion per year and the Virginia class submarine, at a savings of \$2.2 billion per year. Cutting nuclear weapons programs back to a deterrent force, not a “usable” arsenal, could yield savings up to \$13 billion per year as a consequence of cutting the U.S. arsenal to 1,000 warheads (deployed and in reserve) versus current levels of 10,000 (deployed and on “active status”). The USB also proposes a reduction of the costly, unworkable missile defense program from a \$10 billion-plus rush to deploy unreliable systems to a \$2 billion research and development program.¹⁰

The USB task force then proposes transferring \$52 billion of these military cuts to investing in neglected security tools such as U.S. contributions to international organizations; beefed up diplomacy (\$1.8 billion); non-proliferation efforts, with a focus on dismantling and securing “loose” nuclear weapons and bomb-making materials (\$4.6 billion); alternative energy sources (\$8.8 billion); economic development (\$10.0 billion); nuclear plant hardening, chemical plant protection and port security – including monitoring of shipping containers (\$3.75 billion); and increased investments in public health infrastructure and first responders (\$14 billion).¹¹

One could argue with specific figures set out in the USB, but the concept of re-balancing security spending to address the full range of threats facing the United States by investing in both military and non-military tools of security is an essential step forward.

Some of the larger of the USB’s proposed investments in non-military tools of security deserve further discussion.

¹⁰ Lawrence Korb and Miriam Pemberton, principal authors, Report of the Task Force on a Unified Security Budget for the United States, 2007, Washington, DC, Foreign Policy in Focus and the Center for Defense Information, May 2006, pp. 16-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-43.

Spending on alternative energy sources has multiple benefits, from fending off future conflicts over energy resources to reducing dependence on fossil fuels that contribute to global warming. While competition for energy sources is not the only cause of conflict in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and other energy-rich areas, it is an important underlying factor. As for global warming, the damage caused by further human-driven changes in the earth's climate could be catastrophic, second perhaps only to a global nuclear war in its human consequences. Hence, energy policy *is* security policy.

Development assistance – whether in the form of funding anti-HIV initiatives, child health and literacy programs, or investment in targeted projects designed to improve infrastructure, agriculture, and other pillars of economic independence – is worthwhile in its own right, as a down payment on eliminating poverty, disease, and economic inequality. It also holds out hope of focusing the interests of the world's growing population of young people on positive opportunities rather than negative ideologies such as Islamic fundamentalism. While there is no one-to-one link between deprivation and terrorism, promoting sounder, more prosperous economies in the global south will help to counter ideological support for terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda.

In addition to broadening our definition of what constitutes security, it is critical that we begin a national discussion on what the mission of our armed forces should be. The other proposals discussed in this essay assume an activist global role for the U.S. military, varying only with respect to tactics, the extent to which we reach out to allies and international institutions, and so forth. Their commitment to “modernizing” a military that is already the strongest in the world stems from this assumption.

When should the U.S. use military force? To attack specific terrorist strongholds, to act against nations on the verge of attacking the United States or one of its closest allies, to prevent genocide, or to assist in policing peace agreements in unstable regions.

The Bush administration's “doctrine of preemption” – which really means a first-strike war against a country that poses a distant threat to U.S. security – should be abandoned. Except in extreme circumstances, the United States should seek United Nations and Congressional approval for acts of war, and reach out to allies in a genuine fashion, not in the “take it or leave it” approach that governed alliance-building in the Iraq conflict. This brief list is meant to serve as a basis for discussion, not a final verdict on how the U.S. military should be used in an age of global terrorism. But without a thorough debate on how and when it is appropriate to use military force, any real reforms in U.S. military spending and strategy will be doomed to failure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William D. Hartung, President's Fellow, World Policy Institute; Director, Arms Trade Resource Center

hartung@newschool.edu

212-229-5808 ext. 4257

Bill Hartung is an internationally recognized expert on the arms trade and military spending, and the author of *How Much Are You Making on the War, Daddy? * A Quick and Dirty Guide to War Profiteering in the Bush Administration* (Nation Books/Avalon Group, 2004). His previous books include *And Weapons for All* (HarperCollins, 1995), a critique of U.S. arms sales policies from the Nixon through Clinton administrations.

He has written, co-authored, or contributed chapters to numerous books and studies, including most recently, William Keller and Gordon Mitchell, *Hitting First: Preventive Force in U.S. Military Strategy*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, forthcoming, 2006), and John Feffer, editor, *Power Trip: U.S. Unilateralism and Grand Strategy After September 11th*, (Seven Stories Press, 2003). He has also authored special reports such as *Tangled Web II: A Profile of the Missile Defense and Space Lobbies* (November, 2005) and *U.S. Weapons at War: Promoting Democracy of Fueling Conflict?* (June 2005).

The ATRC was established in 1993 to provide independent research and analysis to journalists, policy makers, and citizen's organizations on issues relating to global weapons proliferation