



**Victory at Risk: Restoring America's  
Military Power: A New War Plan for the  
Pentagon**

By Michael W. Davidson  
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Reviewed by  
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In his first book, Michael Davidson, a retired Army National Guard major general, has issued a clarion call for the U.S. military to fundamentally change course or face the sobering prospect of losing our next war. As a decorated citizen-soldier whose long service began with Vietnam, Davidson advocates a renewed emphasis on preparing for major conflicts while doubting the wisdom of the “war on terrorism.” He reserves special criticism for the tenures of Defense Secretaries Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld as periods of wrongheaded arrogance by civilian officials. His analysis of American military history since World War II provides an important backdrop for his argument that poor civil-military relations have led the United States to an extremely dangerous strategic position. Our force is exhausted and out of balance. Returning to the model of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and General George C. Marshall, where military advice was given greater weight, would be an important step toward crafting a sensible defense strategy devoid of political posturing. The solutions he offers are wide ranging and would require radical movement away from Afghanistan and current defense strategies.

The book is divided into three parts and begins with a survey of the current poor state of military readiness for conventional conflicts. Soldiers need more time, training, and resources. Our war plans are unrealistically optimistic and framed by Pentagon battles between the Services. The Army’s funding bears little relation

to its missions, and ground forces have been overtaxed. We have borrowed from long-term equipment modernization to the short-term costs of contingency operations. He does single out the special operations community for praise, complimenting their joint approach across the full spectrum of military operations.

The second and third parts of the book illustrate his key points about needed defense reforms. Based on his experience in key National Guard and Army Reserve positions, Davidson makes the case for a fundamentally different defense structure and a return to a citizen-soldier army. He assesses that the Pentagon has a “rush-to-war” mindset that favors the expensive Active-duty force when every major American war has been fought and won by citizen-soldier armies. Like Morris Janowitz and other Republican theorists, he views military service as a positive obligation that will increase the connection between the military and American people. We will have more time to build an army with broad-based national service now that the Cold War has ended. Although he acknowledges that the conventional warfight is extremely complex, his prescriptions are not as detailed as his strong historical examples. He does not discuss how an Army with more conventional combat National Guard forces would overcome the challenges of peacetime and postmobilization training that were apparent in roundout brigades during Operation *Desert Storm*. During that war, the Army’s premobilization information on the proficiency of its roundout brigades overstated their capabilities and created significant capability shortfalls. With limited peacetime training, it is still likely the lack of opportunities for realistic training and constraints on the extent of collective training will limit Reserve units to lower levels of organization.

Like military analysts such as Colin Gray and Gian Gentile, Davidson prefers a shift in focus toward preparing for a major war. Standing forces would be used to contain crises and small wars. They would also serve as the base from which the citizen-soldier army would expand. Although he acknowledges the debilitating impact of engagement missions and our escalating workload, he would have deployed forces to Rwanda and Darfur. He still contends that we must apply more strict criteria to the application of military power in the defense of America. His willingness to consider new missions in Africa appears to be in contradiction with his opinion that we must more carefully expend our military resources.

He recommends that we begin by identifying our threats and then devising a strategy to meet those threats. Davidson identifies “expan-

sive” China as an emerging threat with a modernizing force and an expanding navy. Major wars matter, so defeating conventional threats must be our core mission.

It is difficult to agree with Davidson’s premise that all America’s major wars came as surprises. Germany and Japan were vying for greater global roles before shots were fired in World War II. We may not have unambiguous warning of an impending conflict, but as in World War II, we will probably have strong indications of intense military competition.

Some of his harshest comments are aimed at Pentagon civilians stifling the sounder advice of generals and admirals. Secretary Rumsfeld decreased the likelihood of policy dissent and rethinking when policy changes were needed. The examples of Generals Marshall and Creighton Abrams provide keen insights into how courageous decisions could provide the basis for improved military capabilities. Military officers should have more forcefully presented their assessments directly to the President. Advocating more authority for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he envisions senior generals and admirals defining the next defense strategy. Although he does not state it specifically, it appears he would question the necessity of the Chairman and Secretary of Defense both publishing strategies. As was the case with Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Davidson believes much of what needs to be fixed in the Pentagon will be fixed from outside.

It is hard to ignore the passion and thoughtful experience Davidson brings to the subject of defense reform. There is no doubt the role of the citizen-soldier should be redefined to better meet our post-Cold War requirements. General Craig McKinley, USAF, chief of the National Guard Bureau, has already discussed focusing on helping the Nation build partnership capacity worldwide. Somehow the linkage among the Department of Defense, Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development efforts must be fundamentally addressed in a whole-of-government approach. The Reserve components could be an important part of a solution, especially if they share Michael Davidson’s desire to contribute fully to the defense of freedom. This important work enriches the reform debate and deserves to be studied by strategic planners as Americans consider the future of the military after current contingency operations. **JFQ**

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