

Grand illusion: Costs of war and empire

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

The election results of November and the firing of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have raised hopes of a significant change in U.S. foreign policy. Many blame Rumsfeld and the neoconservative ideologues for the disaster in Iraq, while neocons protest that Rumsfeld's "light army" strategy is the real problem. Some things should improve simply by virtue of the demise of Rumsfeld and the neocons' loss of credibility.

The current foreign-policy crisis, however, vastly exceeds the mistakes of Rumsfeld and the neocons; President Bush is still making nonsensical statements about "winning in Iraq" and "fulfilling the mission," and his administration is still loaded with people who want him to stake his legacy on doing so. The neoconservative ideology of his administration is merely an exaggerated version of the normal politics of American empire. Before a significant change for the better is possible, there must be a reckoning with the costs of the U.S.'s perpetual war and military empire. The recently approved Pentagon budget is a good place to get a measure of the hypermilitarized situation we are in.

The 2007 Pentagon budget, which pays for normal personnel, procurement and operational expenses, is up to \$462 billion. The budget bill passed the Senate in September by a vote of 100 to 0, with virtually no debate. It includes \$85 billion for weapons (a 7 percent increase) and seven new warships. It includes \$24 billion to "reset" army and marine corps equipment, which is wearing out six times faster than expected because of the war. In a novel turn, the House and Senate decided to vote simultaneously on the regular budget and the fall supplement, which came to \$70 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan, making a total outlay for fiscal 2007 of \$532.8 billion, with the next supplemental bill—a big one—already on its way. This budget does not include costs for nuclear weapons—set at \$22 billion for next year—which are allocated to the Energy Department.

Despite these immense outlays, budget analysts are warning of a coming financial train wreck, because the appropriations—in every category—fall short of the true costs of the war and the empire. Today the U.S. is spending \$2 billion per week in Iraq, nearly all of it from emergency spending bills that add up to \$380 billion thus far. The total for Afghanistan is \$100 billion. These figures do not include disability and health payments for returning troops, inducements for soldiers to serve additional deployments, extra pay for reservists and National Guard members, and additional foreign aid to supportive nations. When these costs are included, along with the Pentagon's unprecedented dependence on expensive private contractors, the bill for five years of involvement in Iraq is expected to run at least \$1.5 trillion, all of it added to the federal debt. Economist Joseph Stiglitz and public finance specialist Linda Bilmes estimate that \$2 trillion is more realistic.

That comes to \$18,000 per household—a far cry from what Americans were told to expect at the outset, when Rumsfeld said the war would cost under \$50 billion, and Paul Wolfowitz said Iraq's oil would finance the nation's reconstruction. The U.S. could have fixed Social Security or provided health insurance for all uninsured Americans for the next half-century with the amount it is spending in Iraq. As it is, since the U.S. is borrowing to pay nearly the entire bill, it faces interest costs of approximately \$300 billion for an offensive war of choice.

Meanwhile the country is caught in the classic imperial dilemma of spending immense sums on the military yet lacking enough military to cover its foreign policy. Two months ago Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker withheld his required 2008 budget plan as a protest against what his staff called a “disastrous” and “unsustainable” situation in the army. The army's regular budget this year is \$99 billion, but Schoomaker is holding out for a 41 percent increase in 2008. A senior army official says, “Yes, it's incredibly huge. These are just incredible numbers.” Another senior Pentagon official, speaking of Schoomaker's hardball tactics, says, “This is unusual, but hell, we're in unusual times.” Top budget official Jerry Sinn explains: “It's kind of like the old rancher saying, ‘I'm going to size the herd to the amount of hay that I have.’ Schoomaker can't size the herd to the amount of hay that he has because he's got to maintain the herd to meet the current operating environment.”

By law, the army has been limited to 482,400 troops, but 30,000 troops added on a temporary basis in 2004 have become more or less permanent. The army's current active duty force is 504,000, with a ceiling of 512,400, of which more than 400,000

have done at least one tour of combat duty. More than one-third of these troops have been deployed twice or more. They are supplemented by 346,000 troops from the Army National Guard, which were thoroughly tapped out a year ago, although the guard has rebounded since then, recruiting 19,000 more soldiers this year than last year. Still, the army is struggling to sustain rotations, and it has instituted what amounts to a back-door draft by relying on the National Guard and extending many tours of duty.

For the past three years neocons outside the Pentagon have warned that America's occupying force in Iraq is too small. This has also been the mantra of liberal hawks such as Thomas Friedman and Kenneth Pollack. Usually this argument proceeds to the verdict that the U.S. Army itself is too small, and that Rumsfeld's fixation with high-tech warfare has been part of the problem. In this version of recent history, if the U.S. had occupied Iraq with 300,000 troops (as General Eric Shinseki advised in the first place), everything would be different today.

But that is a blame-game version of the same stupendously wrong argument that got the U.S. into Iraq. Certainly, the country is paying a terrible price for the arrogance of the Bush team, which had a vision of the outcome in Iraq that it allowed no one to challenge. But even a competent U.S. occupier would not have had enough power to prevent the insurgency or the civil war. Iraq exploded because it is the Arab world's Yugoslavia and because the American invader is radioactive in the Middle East. The U.S.'s innocent self-image as the redeemer nation and benevolent superpower does not resonate, to put it mildly, with most Iraqis, and the hostility between Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'ites is beyond American control. Adding more U.S. troops to this picture would not have made it better, and will not.

Rumsfeld symbolizes the contradictions of the perpetual war. He shared the neocon desire to overthrow half a dozen governments, but tried to show that it could be done at minimal cost, without a Colin Powell-sized fuss. Even the U.S. didn't have a large enough military to combine the Powell Doctrine of only using overwhelming force with neocon ambitions, and today the Bush administration is caught in the aftermath of this contradiction. The U.S. ended up spending hundreds of billions anyway, but with little to show for it. Neocons warn that all of it will be wasted if the U.S. does not pour massive new resources into Iraq *and* deal with its problems in Iran and Syria. They want a cold war-sized army, twice as many troops in Iraq, a military strike against Iran and the next generation of high-tech weapons—all without a draft.

Rumsfeld bitterly disappointed the neocons on issues of Iraq strategy and army expansion, but in both cases he did so in the name of increasing America's global military power. He leaves behind a substantially restructured military that reflects his vision of how to sustain the U.S.'s military dominance without instituting a draft. For six years Rumsfeld pursued a "military transformation" that significantly globalized America's military reach. In his book *Imperial Grunts*, Robert Kaplan celebrates this vision, which sees the country's expeditionary force, especially its marine corps commando component, as the heart and soul of the new American military. Rumsfeld was infatuated with the combination of high-technology weapons and low-technology unconventional war-fighting that prevailed in Afghanistan. He wants an American military that combines high technology with a leaner, more adaptable force, restructuring the armed services around the next generation of high-tech weapons.

He seeded the military with officials who shared his vision of a high-tech empire relying heavily on air power and rapid-force projection. Dividing the globe among regional commanders, Rumsfeld gave new responsibilities and financing to specialized commands, shifted regional war-fighting plans away from cold war bases in Europe, obtained easier access to the Middle East and Central Asia, and rewrote U.S. nuclear strategy. More provocatively and expensively, he pressed for a high-tech program called Future Combat Systems, an integrated structure of manned and unmanned air and ground vehicles that communicate with each other and other units through a global military network.

The Future Combat Systems program includes unattended ground sensors and munitions; an intelligent munitions system; four classes of unmanned aerial vehicles; three classes of unmanned ground vehicles; an armed robotic vehicle; eight manned ground vehicles; a mounted combat system; and ten other systems acting as a unified combat force. The army describes the program as the core of its mission of being able to strike any region of the world quickly and powerfully. One of the program's boosters, GlobalSecurity.org, describes it more vividly as a revolutionary "leap ahead" system and the "centerpiece" of the next army: "lightweight, overwhelmingly lethal, strategically deployable, and self-sustaining." The first phase of the program, covering less than one-third of the army's present force structure, is expected to cost \$145 billion, not counting \$25 billion for a communications network or anything for the weapons and technologies needed to equip the army's other brigades. The Pentagon's 2007 budget provides \$3.4 billion

for this program, and the program as a whole is expected to add over \$500 billion to military expenses.

To Rumsfeld and other advocates, this price is worth paying because the Future Combat program will protect American forces with information systems, not heavily armored tanks. No individual element of the system will weigh more than 20 tons, and tanks and mobile cannons will be light enough to be flown to war zones.

To the same end, and for similar reasons, Pentagon budgets are getting “blackier,” to use the defense and intelligence jargon for superclandestine operations. Over 20 percent of the Pentagon’s acquisition budget for 2007 is devoted to secret programs—a return to the cold war level of classified spending. Kaplan explains the necessity of doing so, arguing that the U.S. must bring back the pre-Vietnam rules of engagement using 21st-century technology. Impending technologies such as warhead-like bullets and neurobiological signature-tracking satellites will make it easier to carry out assassinations; more important, covert war evades most of the politics of intervention and imperialism. To the extent that the U.S. is able to handle its global management problems with Special Forces and the CIA’s military wing, it circumvents having to deal with domestic politics and the UN Security Council. Kaplan, like Rumsfeld, wants the CIA to be “greener” (increasing its uniformed military wing) and the Special Forces to be “blackier.”

A further variation on this trend is that the 2007 Pentagon budget funds approximately \$1 billion in programs that could lead to the development of dual-use space weapons. Until mid-October the U.S. had no formal policy on new military missions in outer space; now it has a stunningly imperial one. On October 13, President Bush signed a National Space Policy that ruled out any future arms-control agreements that might limit U.S. operations in space. The new policy, which was vetted quietly in Congress, asserts that the U.S. has a right to deny access to space to any nation that the U.S. government deems to be “hostile to U.S. interests.” That is the Monroe Doctrine applied to outer space. The leading watchdog on this issue is the nonpartisan Center for Defense Information in Washington. Director Theresa Hitchens notes the obvious: the new policy opens the door to “a space-war fighting strategy,” and it has a “very unilateral tone.”

There are no codes of conduct about how military missions in outer space would be conducted, nor any rules about how space weapons would be operated. The Bush administration’s position is that since there is no space arms race, there is no need

of an arms control agreement in this area. Congress has never voted on, nor even debated, investment in space weapons. But the Bush administration is quietly funding programs that will create “facts in orbit”—the development, testing and deployment of space weapon technologies. Hitchens remarks: “Congress must become more aware of these efforts, hidden in plain sight within the Pentagon’s Byzantine budget request, and ensure that such programs do not go forward until a proper, in-depth, and intergovernmental policy-making process, including congressional and public input, is concluded.”

What *is* being debated is the extent of army expansion. Neocons rail constantly that the current army is too small. They want the U.S. to move in the direction of the cold war standard for the army, which was 780,000 soldiers. Democrat Jack Reed, a key player on the Senate Armed Services Committee, wants an increase to 532,000 soldiers, and Hillary Clinton has come out for an unspecified military expansion. Since the American hegemon is obviously overstretched, the cause of army expansion has become increasingly bipartisan.

As for the current barrage of obituaries for neoconservatism, it is worth remembering that we have heard them before. In the 1990s the neocons were written off as a political force, usually with the assurance that they were outdated, or too ideological, or too aggressive and controversial for the Republican Party, or all of the above. Today it is happening again—this time with better reason, for the catastrophe in Iraq is colossal.

But the obituaries are premature again, because neoconservatism is merely an exaggerated version of normal American imperialism, and the neocons have the best network of think tanks, journals and media connections in Washington. The National Security Council, the vice president’s office and the Pentagon are still loaded with neocons, and their candidate for president in 2008, John McCain, is leading the Republican field. Most important, neoconservatism became potent in the first place because it aggressively made the case for extending America’s global preeminence. Beginning as an especially militant form of anticommunism, it morphed into a vision of global empire after communism collapsed. It traded upon the historic American myths of innocence, exceptionalism and manifest destiny. It offered a vision of what the United States should do with its unrivaled global power. In its most rhetorically seductive versions, it conflated the expansion of American power with the dream of universal democracy. In all of this it proclaimed that the maximal use of American power was good for America and the world.

In other words, it defended the U.S.'s routine practices of empire and extended them. Neoconservatism since the end of the cold war is defined by its doctrine of "full spectrum dominance," yet this doctrine is far from unique to neoconservatives. It was a staple of defense industry and Pentagon literature before Bush took office. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, in their *Joint Vision* statements of 1996 and 2000, declared that the U.S. is committed to sustaining "full spectrum dominance" on a global scale as a primary military policy. *Joint Vision 2020* put it this way: "The overall goal of the transformation described in this document is the creation of a force that is dominant across the full spectrum of military operations—persuasive in peace, decisive in war, preeminent in any form of conflict. . . . Full spectrum dominance [is] the ability of U.S. forces, operating unilaterally or in combination with multinational and interagency partners, to defeat any adversary and control any situation across the full range of military options."

That put it as plainly as possible—and this was during the Clinton administration. When Bush took office, the U.S. was overdue for a moral and political reckoning with the compulsive expansionism of unrivaled power. A year later Bush squandered a precious opportunity to make a huge step toward a community of nations. Not since the end of World War II had there been such a moment. If the U.S. had responded to the attacks of September 11, 2001, by joining with NATO, sending U.S. and NATO forces after al-Qaeda and building new structures of collective security on regional and global bases, it would have gained the world's gratitude. Instead the Bush administration took a course of action that caused an explosion of anti-American hostility throughout the world, committing the U.S. to a doctrine of perpetual war and invading Iraq.

Nearly 40 years ago, Senator William Fulbright warned that the U.S. was well on its way to becoming an empire that exercised power for its own sake, projected to the limit of its capacity and beyond, filling every vacuum and extending American force to the farthest reaches of the earth. As the power grows, he warned, it becomes an end in itself, separated from its initial motives (all the while denying that this is the case); governed by its own mystique, the nation projects power merely because it has it.

Having made a terrible mistake in Iraq, the U.S. is faced with grim choices. But some are less bad than others, and in the past month the hope of finding the best one, which gets the U.S. out of Iraq, got some political wind in its sails. The massive presence of the foreign invader poisons everything that it touches there. If the U.S.

can find its way out of Iraq, it may find another opportunity to reckon with the moral and political consequences of its compulsive expansionism.