

NATIONAL DEFENSE

The Great Transformation

Why are the champions of Reagan's defense buildup arguing for a smaller, more technological military?

By Mark Williams Pontin

John Arquilla himself might describe his new book on foreign policy as an academic text, unlikely to be noticed or discussed beyond a small circle of professors and policymakers. But he has insight into American national strategy and knows a lot about new military technologies, and a few of his passing claims in *The Reagan Imprint* might make it grist for future historians.

One such claim is that one man, Andrew Marshall, was primarily responsible for proposing to Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s that the United States ratchet up its military spending, in order to prompt an arms race that would be so economically punishing it would help dispatch the Soviet Union to the dustbin of history.

It's a plausible assertion. If one speculated about the identities of the specific architects of Reagan's strategy, it would be hard to think of a more likely candidate than Marshall, who through seven presidencies, and now in his mid-80s, has remained the reclusive, semilegendary director of the Office of Net Assessment, the Pentagon's in-house think tank of strategic analysts and futurists. Certainly, John Arquilla—a consultant to Santa Monica, CA-based think tank Rand, Pentagon advisor, and professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA—has an insider's knowledge. He also has an agenda, however.

In *The Reagan Imprint*, Arquilla writes that his book's raison d'être was his "deepening sense of unease about the general direction of American foreign policy and national security strategy.... The United States is squan-

dering the remarkable reversal of fortune in world affairs that Ronald Reagan engineered." By reassessing Reagan's strategic legacy, Arquilla proposes, we might understand how American policy needs to be adjusted.

As the titles of his previous books suggest—*Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, or *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*—Arquilla is among a corps of defense thinkers who, following Marshall's lead, have promoted the concept of U.S. military "transformation." Nowadays, transformation, in its specialized sense, is an official policy of the U.S. military, instituted by another Marshall acolyte, former Rand chairman Donald Rumsfeld.

"Transformation" was considered an easier word for the Pentagon's generals and admirals to swallow than "revolution"—as in "revolution in military affairs," or RMA, which was how Marshall and the other originators of the concept first described their big idea.

As either transformation or revolution, however, the policy entails moving America's armed services away from the massed forces and big weapons systems of the 20th century and toward smaller organizational units that use modern information, communications, and robotics technology to mount the kind of agile campaign seen in Afghanistan in 2001.

Long-range smart missiles, drone aircraft, and cyber attacks on enemies' communications systems are all part of the vision of transformation. Longer-term plans call for even more advanced technologies. The massively ambitious

Future Combat Systems program, for instance, will create a "system of systems" networking all elements of the U.S. armed services to enable unprecedented levels of joint connectivity and "battlespace" awareness. Bolder still is the Future Warrior Concept effort, which the U.S. Army is conducting in tandem with MIT: by 2020, it will supposedly have produced the ultimate infantryman's kit, integrating fluid-based body armor that hardens in a thousandth of a second and a nanotechnology-based powered exoskeleton. Researchers are unabashed to admit that the battle suits in *Starship Troopers*, Robert Heinlein's classic science fiction novel, were an inspiration.

Expensive new toys are, of course, usually welcomed at the Pentagon. But in the vision laid out by Andrew Marshall and his followers, transforming the U.S. military will ultimately mean fewer generals and admirals with fewer big toys—fewer aircraft carrier battle groups, fewer heavy-tank divisions, and fewer next-generation fighter planes. So while the American military establishment pays lip service to transformation, its actual attitude has been along the lines of St. Augustine's prayer: "O Lord, help me to be pure, but not yet."

The Reagan Imprint is best understood as, partly, Arquilla's attempt to sell transformation in its pure version. A smaller, more agile military would be cheaper, better suited for today's regional conflicts, and less antagonizing to other nations, he argues.

Arquilla maintains that even Reagan's massive conventional military buildup should be understood in terms of his desire to prevent any future conflict between NATO and Warsaw Pact forces from escalating into a thermonuclear exchange. Because NATO war games in Europe during the 1970s had regularly ended with the American commander calling for use of tactical nuclear weapons to fend off numerically superior Soviet conventional forces,

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**THE REAGAN IMPRINT:
 IDEAS IN AMERICAN
 FOREIGN POLICY FROM
 THE COLLAPSE OF
 COMMUNISM TO THE
 WAR ON TERROR**
 By John Arquilla
 Ivan R. Dee, 2006, \$26.00



Reagan asked the Pentagon what was necessary to avoid that contingency. The military responded, predictably, that it would need tens of billions more dollars for more troops and technology. Reagan was willing to foot the bill, and—according to Arquilla—the ensuing buildup also served to implement Marshall's 1981 proposal that U.S. military funding be increased to a level that would be punishingly difficult for the U.S.S.R. to match.

The strategy worked. But as a result, Arquilla insists, the Pentagon learned to regard massive defense budgets as its due. The Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation estimates that the U.S. military will spend more than \$550 billion in fiscal year 2007, plus an additional \$50 billion Pentagon request to support operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. That's a larger budget than many from the Cold War years and more than the combined military spending of every other country in the world.

Unfortunately, Arquilla argues, the U.S. military's beloved "big platform" systems have few practical applications against the enemy America now faces: a global terrorist insurgency. The transformation programs pushed by Marshall, Bumsfeld, Arquilla, and others are proceeding: investments in special forces, drone aircraft, and the like will increase by 15 percent in 2007, and

networked, downsized, and nimble units have been assembled. But the Pentagon remains generally disposed to military gigantism. Most of the \$84 billion in weapons spending called for in the Department of Defense budget is being misdirected, Arquilla believes, to items like the F-22 and F-35 fighters, advanced warships for surface combat and coastal warfare, and the CVN-21, the navy's next-generation supercarrier, which will start construction in 2007 and be bigger than today's Nimitz-class carriers—already the largest warships ever built.

In addition, Arquilla says, maintaining a mass army to deal with other old-style mass armies will increasingly and needlessly put hundreds of thousands of American servicemen and women in harm's way, as smart, precision-targeted weapons like cruise missiles become progressively cheaper and more accessible to other governments or groups.

Even a war against an increasingly militaristic China would not necessarily involve armies of millions or fleets of expensive warships, Arquilla argues; the Chinese themselves, rather than building aircraft carrier battle groups, are developing technologies like maneuverable sea-going mines, supersonic antiship missiles, and supercavitation torpedoes, which

move at hundreds of knots by pushing a friction-reducing bubble of air before them. In a world of ever more-accurate weapons, the Pentagon's continuing allegiance to its giant platforms and systems is increasingly likely to be the downfall of U.S. forces in battle, Arquilla insists.

Some of the surgical military measures Arquilla advocates would offend conventional wisdom. In *The Reagan Imprint*, he laments that Reagan's secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger, blocked the initiation of a "war on terror" that the president had approved in a still-classified 1984 document, National Security Decision Directive No. 138. The directive apparently authorized secret CIA and FBI paramilitary squads, alongside military units like the navy's SEALs and the army's special forces, to undertake preëemptive and retaliatory sabotage and targeted killings.

Unlovely as some of this may seem, Arquilla's strategic stance has several virtues. First, it's preferable to the traditional Pentagon methods to which the U.S. may resort in the case of a "long war" against Islamic fundamentalists. Second, whether or not defense gigantism is a recipe for military disaster, today's level of spending on big-platform systems is simply economically unsustainable: government budgets are about to feel enormous new pressures as baby boomers retire and Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security spending balloons. Third, Arquilla's propositions offer a route to reducing the American military's visibility around the world.

In a world where technology is placing ever greater destructive power in the hands of ever smaller groups, the possibility of megaterrorism has emerged. In such a world, John Arquilla is unashamed to point out, keeping a lower profile might be a sensible U.S. military strategy. **TR**

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