Review Essay

Taking the Lead
Michael O'Hanlon

The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America's Military
Dana Priest. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003.

Washington Post reporter Dana Priest's book, *The Mission*, is a good book on a very important topic that few have examined seriously before. In the main, she describes and analyses the greatly expanded roles of the US regional military commanders around the world – known as 'CINCs', for commanders-in-chief, until Donald Rumsfeld renamed them 'combatant commanders'. Her particular focus is on the late Clinton and early Bush years, a period encompassing, among other significant events, the Kosovo and Afghanistan wars.

Based on copious field reporting and numerous interviews with several key CINCs, Priest documents the way in which these four-star military officers have often become the primary conceptualisers and managers of American foreign policy. The book draws on several outstanding articles written while Priest was on the beat for the *Post*, buttressed by research performed during a sabbatical at the US Institute of Peace.

Priest's main observation in the book is that, for the regional military commanders, 'Taking the lead had become the mission' (p. 40). Shortly thereafter, in one of the book's stage-setting chapters, she explains: 'on Clinton's watch the military slowly, without public scrutiny or debate, came to surpass its civilian leaders in resources and influence around the world' (p. 42). Priest's principal argument is that this development has gone too far. Again, in her words (p. 18), her book is not an indictment of the military personnel who have realised a broader role for the Pentagon in American foreign policy, but rather

> is meant as a criticism of civilian leaders in Congress, the White House, and the State Department who failed to find more appropriate or nuanced engagement programs, and of Pentagon leaders who did not fully consider the context in which American troops operated, and continue to operate, abroad.

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Through the book's 400-page narrative, which covers the experiences of several key CINCs during the period 1998–2002, Priest sprinkles her elaborations of this general line of criticism. In her eyes, congressional oversight of overseas military operations weakened in the 1990s – or, to put it differently, the Department of Defense found ways around earlier oversight procedures. The State Department lost influence due to a number of factors, most notably lack of resources within US foreign assistance and diplomacy accounts. And American foreign policy was increasingly run by individuals properly accountable to no one in the political process. While the regional military commanders do report to the Secretary of Defense and the President, they are not elected and are not political appointees of those top executive branch officials.

Forward-deployed assistant secretaries

Even those who, like me, do not find Priest's argument fully compelling must applaud her attention to this topic. Since the Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986, America's regional military commanders have exercised a great deal more power. The changes in wartime responsibilities are the best known. In particular, the regional commanders-in-chief report directly to the Secretary of Defense, without the formal intervention of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in warmaking decisions. Priest goes well beyond these heralded reforms, however, to examine the quieter side of the CINCs' world – the day-to-day, month-to-month interactions these individuals have in their dealings not just with foreign militaries but foreign governments more broadly. Usually based in or near their regions of expertise, the CINCs are close enough to the action to spend a good deal of time essentially functioning as diplomats. They have private aeroplanes, travel budgets and security staffs. Desk officers focused on various countries within their regions are constantly at their beck and call. Unlike ambassadors, they have a sufficiently broad geographic scope to deal with regional issues rather than being confined to state-to-state matters. In this regard, they are like forward-deployed assistant secretaries of state. In addition to their proximity to their areas of responsibility, they also have the equivalent of 'walking around money' – a lot of it, typically $50 million to $100 million per command per year. They also have funds to train foreign militaries, some of them beyond direct congressional oversight, and to build infrastructure and otherwise act a little like the US Agency for International Development – though with greater policy freedom and less stringent oversight.

The most strategically important CINCs are those covering four regions: Europe plus Africa; the Middle East through Central and half of South Asia; East Asia and the Pacific; and South and Central America. The

commands are referred to respectively as EUCOM, CENTCOM, PACOM and SOUTHCOM. Each is run by a four-star military officer, who usually holds the position for three years – probably his last military job before retirement. The CINC is typically aided by a joint-service staff with several thousand personnel. This system ensures that none of the four military services exerts excessive influence over any command or commander. Two of the commands are based in their theatres of specialisation, and the other two as close as possible to those theatres within the contiguous United States (and outside of Washington). The respective command locations are Belgium, Florida, Honolulu and again Florida. (The fifth and newest regional command, NORTHCOM, covers only the United States, Mexico and Canada and hence has few of the broader responsibilities of the other four.)

Priest devotes her main chapters to several case studies involving all four major commands and their respective CINCs. Specifically, she focuses on General Anthony Zinni (CENTCOM), General Wesley Clark (EUCOM), Admiral Dennis Blair (PACOM) and General Charles Wilhelm (SOUTHCOM). She examines the role of 'A-team' Special Forces in Afghanistan (CENTCOM's area of responsibility), US military trainers in Nigeria (EUCOM), Green Berets in Colombia (SOUTHCOM) and again military training in Indonesia (PACOM). Treating the above cases in about 100 pages, she then devotes 135 to the Balkans (EUCOM, of course) and to the roles of regular army units (the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions). This heavy dose of Balkans analysis lends the book a certain analytical asymmetry, but has the benefit of providing one very detailed and informative case study.

Priest makes several important observations. First, US military training in places such as Nigeria and Indonesia can make a substantial strategic difference at modest cost – and even more modest visibility to the Congress or the American people. Second, the Department of Defense's flexibility, its resources and its ability to focus effort regionally through the respective commands allows for a very powerful policy capability that often outdistances the State Department and other instruments of the US government. Third, both US special operations units and regular forces can be called upon to perform tasks ranging from undercover combat operations to covert action inside foreign countries to nation-building featuring roles closer to those commonly associated with Peace Corps volunteers. But they are not necessarily good at all of these tasks, and the Pentagon's institutional biases, strengths and weaknesses are not necessarily conducive to long-range political and economic development tasks that the United States must often pursue overseas. On most of these factual points, Priest is on target. And she gets high marks for the tireless,

brave, innovative reporting that substantiates her assessments and gives her book a highly readable quality. There are, however, a number of points on which Priest can be challenged.

CINCs: neither feckless nor maverick

Contrary to Priest's suggestions, it is not clear that the power of the CINCs is such a bad thing. The policy outcomes in the cases she considers seem positive more often than negative. CINCs and their forces helped overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan and helped stabilise Sierra Leone, for example. Presumably Priest does not lament these developments. Even in places where the role of the American military is more controversial, as in Indonesia, the problem is not really that the wrong arm of the US government is leading policy. More likely, the policy decision about whether to try to constructively influence Indonesia's government and security forces by any means – military or civilian – was inherently debatable and controversial.

In their book *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America*, former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter manifest clear and justifiable pride in the way in which they brought the American armed forces into the nation-building and peacemaking business. Perry and Carter served in the first Clinton administration, just before the unfolding of most of the events Priest documents. Their substantive message is that, as a matter of policy, they deliberately pushed the US military to work with allied and non-allied forces in the Balkans, to build up mutual confidence in exchanges with the Chinese military and to undertake other tasks that had less to do with warfighting than with reducing the chances of future wars occurring.[1] Priest has not fully recognised that the broader foreign policy functions exercised by the CINCs are not extracurricular activities, but rather part of their new job descriptions. Furthermore, she is unconvincing in her intimation that this broadening of responsibility is generally inadvisable.

Priest seems to agree with Condoleezza Rice's famous criticism of peacekeeping in the Balkans that the 82nd Airborne shouldn't be escorting kids to school. But if the 82nd needs to be there for the purpose of deterrence, and yet doesn't need to conduct combat operations on a daily basis, what is wrong with using its soldiers to protect civilians, rebuild infrastructure and otherwise help repair a broken society? Perhaps some of these tasks could be done more effectively by civilians – in fact, many are – but the 82nd would need to be there anyway. Again, the criticism does not fully hold up.

Nor is there much evidence that the CINCs systematically overstepped their proper powers or undertook policies of which their civilian superiors

disapproved or were unaware. Indeed, during the years in question, the CINC who most clearly reached beyond administration policy – General Wesley Clark, commander of the EUCOM and thus NATO's top military officer during the Kosovo war – was in effect fired as a result. Clark pushed for more assertive options, up to and including a possible ground invasion of Kosovo, before Secretary of Defense William Cohen and other members of the Clinton administration felt comfortable with such an approach. Even though those siding with Clark ultimately won the debate in large measure, the general's chutzpah and public assertiveness was not forgotten or forgiven.

In other areas, Priest's critiques seem valid per se but inapposite to her overarching argument about the CINCs' power. For example, in the book's opening and closing pages, she lambastes the Bush administration – rightly in my view – for a hands-off approach to Middle East peace negotiations and post-war nation-building in Afghanistan. But neither of these mistakes seems like a case of letting the US military run rampant. If anything, especially in the latter case, the problem is that the CINCs were not accorded enough responsibility.

Priest also seems confused about how to assess Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. She clearly disagrees with many of his policy views. Yet he would seem the perfect antidote to the trend of increasing military authority that Priest documents and impugns elsewhere in her narrative. As noted, Rumsfeld scaled back the CINCs' prestige, renaming them combatant commanders to avoid any suggestion that their responsibilities went beyond wartime planning and execution. He tried to get US forces out of the Balkans and the Sinai, losing the bureaucratic struggle to Colin Powell. He did scale back military-to-military exchanges with China, overturning at least temporarily and partially a major Perry accomplishment in getting the US military more into the diplomatic business. Rumsfeld also took the CINCs down a notch even in matters of warfighting. He and another civilian, CIA Director George Tenet, had considerable impact on the Afghanistan war plan, as Bob Woodward documents in his book *Bush at War*.[2] By all accounts, Rumsfeld also had a significant hand in the Iraq war plan, pushing for somewhat smaller forces than the Army and CENTCOM initially preferred and a greater use of special operations forces in the campaign. If there was a problem of excessive military influence in American foreign policy, Secretary Rumsfeld appears to have remedied much of it. But this point does not come through in Priest's book.

Flawed but significant

The real story of America's CINCs – or combatant commanders – is a little more complex than Priest suggests. Sometimes they do indeed

display remarkable power, and occasionally they do so without the knowledge of the Congress. But their work is generally in line with the policy of their civilian superiors, and rarely opaque to Congress in its important dimensions. The fact that their work is so well coordinated and resourced also means that it is often quite effective. More often than not, it would be better to hold the US overseas military commands up as models for the rest of government than to suggest that they be weakened. Moreover, the suggestion that the CINCs are gradually and inexorably growing in power and influence seems largely invalidated by the policies of the Bush administration.

All that said, *The Mission* is so original in theme and unparalleled in scope that it is bound to have some rough analytical edges. The book is perhaps better reporting than analysis, and more useful as a trove of investigative work by one of the world's best defence reporters than as a convincing policy assessment. But if that is a criticism, it is a mild one, given how much this book does magnificently. Overall, Priest has written perhaps the most informative book produced since the 1986 Goldwater Nichols reforms about how America's regional commanders do their jobs. The regional commands now constitute such a major instrument of American foreign policy, and have been so rarely studied or appreciated, that Priest's book may count as one of the ten most important books about the American military this decade.

Notes

1 Ashton B. Carter and William James Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1999).

2 Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).