

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

The Threshold of War

UNDER what circumstances should US armed forces be sent into combat? The question has its roots in Vietnam, where more than 47,000 Americans died in a war their nation lacked the will to win.

In 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger announced a new doctrine on use of force. Troops should not be committed to combat unless a vital national interest was at stake and until other options were exhausted. If we went to war, it would be with sufficient force and a determination to win.

A leading advocate of that change was Colin Powell, who was Weinberger's military assistant in 1984. He was also Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1991 when the precepts of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine were applied with great success in the Persian Gulf War.

Ironically, it was during the Presidency of Bill Clinton, noted for his protest to the Vietnam War, that the policy was rolled back.

Madeleine Albright, ambassador to the UN, captured the tone in a question to Powell in 1993: "What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

The threshold of combat fell lower. American officials quoted by the *New York Times* said the reason for airstrikes near Sarajevo in May 1995 was to "drop a few bombs and see what happens."

The Pentagon announced that US forces would be used to defend "important" but not necessarily vital interests, and the strange concept of "combat operations other than war" appeared in joint military doctrine.

In operations from Somalia to Haiti to Bosnia, the dividing lines blurred between peace and war. When substantial strikes against Iraq were being considered in February 1998, Albright, by then Secretary of State, said, "We are talking about using military force, but we are not talking about war."

Nor was it war in August 1998 when we fired 79 sea-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles at terrorist

camps in Afghanistan and at what may or may not have been a chemical plant in Sudan. And that was that.

We moved into and out of combat without sustained purpose. In December 1998, Operation Desert Fox sent 650 air sorties and 400 cruise missile strikes against Iraq, but it

The dividing line between peace and war has been blurred in recent years.

was called off after 70 hours, in part because bombing during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan would be "profoundly offensive."

Only rarely—notably in Kosovo in 1999—has a combat operation persisted until a major military objective was achieved, and even in Kosovo, the armed forces were bogged down by gradual escalation and political constraints reminiscent of Vietnam. In the 10 years since the Gulf War, the nation has come full circle on the use of force.

The issue now awaits a decision by the Bush Administration. President Bush and his advisors are considerably less inclined than the Clinton team was toward military excursions abroad. Powell, as Secretary of State, will not follow Albright's freewheeling attitude toward armed conflict.

Bush's view is "old fashioned," says Gordon Adams, senior budget official in the Clinton Administration. "We will have a well-funded military that is designed to go nowhere and prepared to do nothing, because they are only there to fight the nation's wars, and we are not having any," Adams told the *New York Times*.

Clinton's first Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, said almost the same thing when he took office.

Within a year, Aspin was dismissed after an insufficiently supported humanitarian mission suddenly escalated. Eighteen American soldiers were killed trying to capture a local warlord who was riding around in US aircraft two months later.

The next war will come along soon enough, and when it does, it is profoundly to be hoped that the armed forces will be ready for it. Until then, strong military forces will serve to defend the nation and its interests by deterring those who might wish us harm. A well-funded military might even increase the interval between wars.

The armed forces have always performed noncombat roles. The classic example is the Berlin Airlift in the 1940s, a humanitarian mission that had strategic consequences when it thwarted a Soviet attempt to starve West Berlin into submission.

In some cases, it may also be necessary to send the armed forces into combat in situations short of all-out war.

Military historian Richard H. Kohn told the *Washington Post* that "sometimes force is not the last resort, and if it's saved for a last resort, it might then have to be used—and used in much more massive and destructive terms than if it was threatened, or applied in more ambiguous ways, earlier in dealing with a problem."

There is a world of difference between that and dropping a few bombs to see what happens.

When we cross the threshold of combat of any scope or scale, it should not be a casual decision.

When lethal military force is used or threatened, it should be for a well-defined purpose that is important to the nation. It should be for an objective that can be met by military means. We should be willing to support and sustain the action until the objective has been achieved.

The Bush Administration would do well to adopt that as the standard it uses in committing the nation's armed forces to combat. ■