INCE the late 1940s, the US had based National Military Strategy on the necessity of deterring and, if deterrence failed, successfully fighting a global war against the Soviet Union. In 1987, Joint Staff strategists began to examine some of the planning assumptions supporting this strategy. Their review led them to conclude that National Military Strategy should put greater emphasis on regional planning.

While strategists were developing new approaches based initially on assessments of US capabilities (but increasingly on their assessment of the reduced threat from the Warsaw Pact), Joint Staff force planners in 1988 began to analyze the force structure that supported current strategy. The prospect of an accelerated decline in defense funding, together with the sweeping changes taking place within the Warsaw Pact, prompted them to recommend significant force reductions.

When Gen. Colin L. Powell became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1989, he brought to the position his own views on the likely shape of the world in the 1990s and a determination to restructure the US armed forces to meet this new environment. He not only gave direction to the efforts already under way on the Joint Staff but pushed them further, shaping them to conform to his strategic vision. The result was a new National Military Strategy and a new conceptualization of force structure to support this strategy. This strategy and its supporting configuration of forces marked a major departure from the US approach to the world during the preceding 40-plus years. Their development influenced as well the development of a new national defense strategy and a new national security strategy.

Scenarios for Regional War

Through [the latter 1980s], Joint Staff strategists continued to press for greater emphasis on regional planning. ... The work done by J-5 in designing scenarios for regional war reinforced Joint Staff strategists’ conclusion that the major focus of strategy must shift to regional planning and led to the realization that this shift would require force restructuring. ... [An important figure in the Base Force story, USAF Maj. Gen. George Lee Butler, in May 1987 became vice director of J-5, strategic plans and policy.] By the time he became director of J-5 in August 1989, [Lt. Gen.] Butler had developed his own strategic overview. ... On the basis of his assessment
of developments in the Soviet Union, Butler concluded that the Cold War was over, Communism had failed, and the world was witnessing a second Russian Revolution. He examined the implications for US strategy of the success of the policy of containment. In his view, the world was entering a multipolar era, in which superpowers would find it increasingly difficult to influence events militarily. In addition to the decline of the Soviet Union and the further evolution of West European alliance relationships, the coming era would see the rise of new hegemonic powers, increasingly intractable regional problems, and the global impact of disastrous Third World conditions.

Butler maintained that the US was the only power with the capacity to manage the major forces at work in the world. Implementing this new use of US power in order to shape the emerging world in accordance with US interests would require a coherent strategy that defined US vital interests, decided the role of the military, and then set the necessary forces in place. It would also require dealing with the nation’s fiscal problems. When he presented his views to the Air Staff in September 1988, he anticipated that budgetary retrenchment would lead to a major restructuring of the armed forces. If they did not undertake this task themselves, they would find reductions forced upon them.

Initially, Butler thought that the changes he had outlined would take place over a decade and that the US would have to deal with them within the context of an ongoing relationship with the Soviet Union. However, in the autumn of 1988, when he traveled to the Soviet Union as head of the US team to negotiate an agreement on the prevention of dangerous military activities, he found that the Soviet Union was in worse condition than he had realized. He concluded that the shift in the balance of world power would therefore be accelerated.

As vice director of J-5, Butler pursued the development of his ideas on the need for a new US approach to the world independently of the Strategy Division’s efforts to shift the focus of strategic planning away from the Soviet Union. However, Joint Staff planners had heard him present his strategic overview elsewhere, and his ideas about the new strategic tasks facing the US were among the factors influencing their attempts to place greater emphasis on regional rather than global planning.

**J-8’s “Quiet Study”**

While these changes in strategic thinking were taking place, the Program and Budget Analysis Division of the Force Structure, Resources, and Assessment Directorate (J-8) had begun to explore the implications of anticipated further budget reductions on force structure, which consumed the largest portion of the defense budget. From autumn 1988 discussions that they had initiated with Congressional staff members and Office of Management and Budget personnel, PBAD action officers had concluded that DoD could expect an accelerated decline in the growth of its budget amounting to an approximately 25 percent real decline over the next five years. This ran counter to OSD projections that the decline would continue at its current rate, resulting instead in an approximately 10 percent decline over the same period.

In anticipation of an accelerated reduction, PBAD began work in October on a closely held study of force reduction options. This “Quiet Study” proposed criteria for proceeding with force reductions and made specific recommendations for cuts, targeting forces that would not be decisive in a global war, those with aging equipment and therefore limited combat effectiveness, and those whose growth was outpacing the growth of the US vital interests, decided the role of the military, and then set the necessary forces in place. It would also require dealing with the nation’s fiscal problems. When he presented his views to the Air Staff in September 1988, he anticipated that budgetary retrenchment would lead to a major restructuring of the armed forces. If they did not undertake this task themselves, they would find reductions forced upon them.

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**Quiet Study I assumed no change in strategy, but Quiet Study II postulated a shift to regional contingencies.**
recommendations for force cuts on the necessity of assuring superiority against any potential adversary. Its criteria for retention of conventional forces therefore included maintaining quality, mobility, flexibility, and readiness.

Powell’s Views on Force Structure

J-8’s views on force structure corresponded closely to those of the new Chairman. As President Reagan’s assistant for national security affairs, Powell had become convinced in 1988 that the changes taking place in the Soviet Union were fundamental. This perception derived principally from his meetings in the Soviet Union with Soviet leaders. The conviction of Reagan, a staunch conservative, that the changes were fundamental also influenced his thinking.

Powell recognized, too, that these changes, together with budgetary pressures, would produce demands for further reductions in defense spending. Although publicly cautious about the long-term effects of the changes in the Soviet Union and their implications for US–Soviet relations, he believed that, if developments in the Soviet Union continued in the same direction, they would lead eventually to changes in US strategy and its supporting force structure and ultimately in the whole military culture.

However, when he became commanding general of the Army’s Forces Command in April 1989, he found that there had been no adjustment in Army thinking. As the commander with responsibility for the Army’s US–based ground forces, he thought about what continued changes in the Soviet Union would mean for his command and for the Army.

While at FORSCOM, Powell reached conclusions about the reductions that would be necessary in an era of constrained resources. He also devised the configuration of forces that evolved into his concept of a Base Force—the minimum force necessary for the US to pursue its interests as a superpower. To respond to the changing strategic environment, he conceived of a force structure that was composed of two regional and two functional forces: Atlantic forces and Pacific forces, whose areas of responsibility would extend respectively across the Atlantic and across the Pacific; contingency forces to deal with sudden crises; and strategic forces to meet the threat still posed by the Soviet nuclear arsenal. He concluded that the Army would have to be cut by 20 to 25 percent and the Navy reduced to a maximum of 400 ships.

He discussed his ideas with his Army colleagues, including Chief of Staff Gen. Carl E. Vuono, but found them reluctant to deal with the issues raised by the changed environment. In May 1989, he presented some of his ideas in a speech to a symposium sponsored by the Association of the US Army. Declaring that the Soviet “bear looks benign,” he told an audience that included most of the other Army four-star generals that the world had changed and the Army must therefore adjust its thinking. While the reality of the Soviet military threat remained, the public’s perception of a lessened threat and its consequent reluctance to fund forces to meet that threat meant that the military must find other bases for its policies and programming. No longer able to count on real growth in the defense budget, the Army would have to make hard choices when submitting its budget requests.

Powell elaborated on these views in his Sept. 20, 1989, confirmation hearing as Chairman. Major force realignments were necessary, he said, because if funding continued to decline while the size of the armed forces and their missions remained unchanged, the result would be hollow forces. He therefore regarded his principal challenge as Chairman to be reshaping defense policies and the armed forces to deal with the changing world and the declining defense budget....

Powell’s Strategic Vision

Soon after becoming Chairman, Powell reviewed the NMS that Crowe had signed in August and realized the extent to which his thinking differed from his predecessor’s. In his early discussions with Butler, the J-5 director emphasized J-5’s work on the recently issued NMS and its role in the US–Soviet military-to-military exchanges, on which Crowe had focused much of his energy during the last months of his term. Powell believed that the changes in the world required a more radical response than the concept of forward presence articulated in the new NMS, and he concluded from these discussions that J-5 was not moving as fast as he wished to adjust strategic planning to the new environment. When Brig. Gen. John D. Robinson, director of J-8, told him about PBAD’s work, that seemed to coincide with his thinking, and he asked to see it.

On Oct. 30, 1989, J-8 briefed Powell on Quiet Study II. Looking for an avenue through which he could begin Joint Staff work on the implementation of his ideas, Powell asked J-8 to work with J-5 to refine its briefing. Strategy Division action officers began working with PBAD to produce a briefing, which they believed would be presented to the service chiefs. The J-8/J-5 working group soon learned that Powell did not wish to brief the service chiefs but planned instead to present his ideas to Dick Cheney, President Bush’s Defense Secretary. On Nov. 2, representatives of J-8 and J-5 met with Powell to hear his strategic vision, and on Nov. 6, he provided them with notes of both his overview of what the world would be like in 1994 and his conception of force structure to meet this changed environment.

Powell projected radical changes in the world by 1994. He anticipated the transformation of the Soviet Union into a federation or commonwealth that had adopted a defensive posture, with its military budget cut by 40 percent, its forces withdrawn from Eastern Europe, and its force levels reduced by 50 percent. In addition, he expected the demise of both the Warsaw Pact and the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, and the consequent recasting of NATO. He also anticipated substantial progress on both conventional and strategic arms control. As a result, warning time in Europe would be six months, and a new strategy would replace that of the forward defense of Western Europe. In the Pacific, relations between the two Koreas would improve, and the US would phase out its bases in the Philippines. In South Asia, India would emerge as a major regional nuclear hegemonic power. Of the major Third World hot spots, the areas of likely US involvement would be Korea and the Persian Gulf. In
response to these changes, the US should not only significantly cut its conventional forces and change the pattern of their deployment but also reduce its strategic nuclear arsenal. Substantially reducing its forward deployments in Europe and Korea, it should cut the Army from its current 18-division active strength of 760,000 to 10–12 divisions totaling 525,000. Instead of the Navy’s current deployment of 551 ships, including 15 carriers, it should plan for 400 ships, including 12 carriers, with its active strength reduced from the current 587,000 to 400,000. While Powell had not yet determined the projected size of the Air Force, he wished to cut the Marine Corps’s Congressionally mandated three division–wing teams from their current active strength of 197,000 to 125,000–150,000. The reduced threat from the Soviet Union, coupled with progress in arms control, would, he believed, make it possible to cut ICBMs from their current level of 1,000 to 500, and ballistic missile submarines from the current 34 to 18–20.

Preparing To Brief Bush

Using Powell’s notes, together with Quiet Study II and Butler’s ideas, the J-8/J-5 working group began to expand the PBAD briefing. With Butler now involved, Robinson, who had provided the strategy and policy guidance for Quiet Study II, deferred to J-5 in these areas. The two directors and their staffs worked closely together to translate Powell’s vision into a briefing....

On Nov. 13, the J-8/J-5 working group presented the expanded briefing, now called “A View to the 90s,” to Powell. There was a further exchange of ideas, after which PBAD did additional work on its recommendations of cuts and the J-5 members of the working group revised the strategy section of the briefing. On Nov. 14, the J-8/J-5 team learned that Powell intended to present the briefing to Bush the next afternoon. Powell had told Cheney about the Joint Staff work, and Cheney wanted him to present his ideas to Bush. They also learned that the briefing did not go as far in recommending reductions as Powell wished to go. He directed a 25 percent manpower cut by 1994, for a total reduction of 300,000 in active strength. The working group continued its revisions. On Nov. 15, there was a meeting of the directors of J-5 and J-8 and PBAD members of the group with the director of the Joint Staff; a presentation of the revised briefing to Powell, followed by a further revision; then another meeting with Powell in preparation for his meeting with Bush.

The result of this two weeks of intensive work was a briefing that presented Powell’s recommended strategy and its rationale, the force structure needed to execute that strategy, and the resulting recommendations for force reductions and reconfiguration. The briefing argued that the drastically different strategic environment projected for 1994 called for a major restructuring of US security policy, strategy, force posture, and capabilities. With a diminished Soviet threat and sharply reduced resources, the focus of strategic planning should shift from global war with the Soviet Union to regional and contingency responses to non–Soviet threats. This strategy could best protect US security interests and maintain US global influence in an era of diminished resources.

US forces must be repostured and restructured to conform with this new strategy. Surveying the projected 1994 world by region, the briefing argued for a reduced but continuing presence worldwide. For regional deterrence, the US should place greater emphasis on overseas presence than on permanently stationed overseas forces, while it should rely primarily on forces based at home to respond to contingencies.

Performing these missions would require ready, flexible, mobile, and technologically superior conventional forces. As for strategic forces, the US must retain its strategic nuclear deterrent as long as the Soviet Union possessed a nuclear capability that could threaten US survival. Therefore a modernized but smaller triad would be an essential component of US strategic force posture. Protecting essential forces and capabilities in an era of reduced resources would necessitate cuts. Applying the criteria it had outlined, the briefing reviewed programs and forces, evaluated their contributions to the new strategy, and proposed both a force structure to be achieved by 1994 and minimum forces necessary for global deterrence and for countering non–Soviet threats. The resulting recommended force structures were larger than Powell had initially outlined. For an interim force structure to be reached by 1994, the briefing proposed an active strength of 630,000 for the Army; 520,000 for the Navy; 500,000 for the Air Force; and 170,000 for the Marine Corps—a total reduction of 287,000 from current strength, with corresponding cuts to be taken in reserve forces. For the minimum forces required for the US to carry out its superpower responsibilities, it projected an active strength of 560,000 for the Army; 490,000 for the Navy; 490,000 for the Air Force; and 160,000 for the Marine Corps—a total reduction of 407,000 from current strength, again with corresponding cuts to be taken in reserve forces.

Debating the Future

On Nov. 9, while the Joint Staff was preparing Powell’s briefing, East Germany opened its borders. Culminating the liberalization that had taken place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall confirmed for Powell his early assessment of the future direction of Soviet policy. He now considered

Powell’s vision and Butler’s ideas, together with Quiet Study II, evolved into “A View to the 90s.”
that the conflict with the Soviet Union was over. He thought that it was a mistake to assume that once the Soviets withdrew from Eastern Europe, they would maintain their Cold War force structure and pursue an offensive military policy from their own territory.

On Nov. 14, when Powell discussed with Cheney his ideas about the implications of these changes for the US, he found that Cheney did not share his perception of the substantially reduced threat from the Soviet Union. Their discussion therefore centered on the question of the need for a major adjustment in US strategy. This began a series of debates between Powell and Cheney on the appropriate US response to the changes in the Soviet Union. While Cheney did not endorse Powell’s views, he gave him free rein to proceed with their development. As noted, he also asked Powell to present his ideas to Bush.

Powell’s Nov. 15 presentation to Bush concentrated on the need to shift US strategy from a global to a regional focus, rather than on the force structure implications of such a shift. Bush responded favorably. Powell then turned his attention to winning support for his views not only on strategy but also on force structure. A Joint Staff team that had not been involved in preparing the “A View to the 90s” briefing critiqued it, and it underwent further revision. On Nov. 20, Powell presented the briefing to a Defense Policy Review Board meeting attended by the Commanders in Chief. He outlined his thinking on the changes in the Soviet Union and their implications for overall US force structure and for the armed forces in each theater. Of the CINCs, [Gen. John R.] Galvin [US European Command] in Europe and Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, US Central Command, were the most receptive to his ideas. Then, on Nov. 22, in a Deep Executive Session of the Tank, he informed the service chiefs that he had discussed with Bush his views on the need for a new strategy and emphasized to them that they must accept force cuts....

Emergence of the Base Force

Meanwhile, Powell continued to debate his views on the Soviet Union and the need for a new strategy not only with Cheney but also with [Paul] Wolfowitz [under-secretary of defense for policy], who, like Cheney, did not share Powell’s outlook on the likely course of events in the Soviet Union. These discussions reinforced Powell’s belief that OSD did not comprehend the depth of the changes taking place in the strategic environment. OSD, in turn, thought that he painted too rosy a picture of the situation....

In February, Powell began working with members of his staff on a further revision of the “A View to the 90s” briefing, which he planned to present to the service chiefs and the CINCs. At his direction, program and budget analysts checked the briefing’s force size recommendations by function and by service. Doing cost analysis, they also examined whether the projected force structure fit within DoD budget guidelines and how further reductions would affect Powell’s recommendations. These analyses resulted in some adjustments in recommended force size.

Powell wished to convey his personal views in the hope of eliciting debate and an exchange of ideas that would lead to a resolution of differences at the CINCs Conference in August. He therefore replaced J-5’s work on the strategic environment with an elaboration of his November notes outlining his strategic projection for 1994. To gain support for his overall approach, he dilated some of his earlier projections that were likely to provoke controversy and divert attention from the main thrust of his argument.

Powell also adopted the term “Base Force” to designate his recommended minimum force. He believed that this would better convey that his proposed force structure represented a floor, below which the US could not go and carry out its responsibilities as a superpower, rather than a ceiling, from which it could further reduce forces. To emphasize the regional focus of the new strategy and force structure, he introduced the conceptual packages that he had devised while at FORSCOM....

The Base Force would have a total active strength of 1.6 million instead of the current 2.1 million and a reserve strength of 898,000 instead of the current 1.56 million. Its conventional component would be composed of 12 active and eight reserve Army divisions; 16 active and 12 reserve Air Force tactical fighter wings; 150,000 personnel in the three active Marine Corps division–wing teams and 38,000 in the reserve division–wing team; and 450 ships, including 12 carriers. This Base Force would, Powell argued, not only meet US defense needs in the new era but provide an expandable base upon which a larger force could be reconstituted should the need arise.

Reluctant Military Leaders

Powell presented the revised briefing to a meeting of the Joint Chiefs and the CINCs on Feb. 26, 1990. He outlined the ideas he had developed in response to the changed strategic and fiscal environment. As he told the Chiefs and CINCs, he had received no guidance from Bush or Cheney. He emphasized to the military leaders that they must start looking at the real future, rather than continuing to request a force structure that would not be funded in current circumstances. He believed that it was necessary to look beyond the programming and budgeting cycle running through 1994 and, instead, aim at 1997 as the target date for achieving his projected force reduc-

Powell adopted the term “Base Force” to designate his recommended minimum force.
tions. He hoped to reach agreement by the end of May on a new strategy that could then provide the basis for both Cheney’s responses to Congressional requirements and the US position in ongoing arms control negotiations and upcoming NATO meetings.

Gen. Maxwell R. Thurman, CINC, US Southern Command, challenged Powell’s presentation, contending that he had not articulated a strategy and that it was not clear how he had reached his views. What was needed was a strategy and a vision behind which they could all rally, not simply the new programming guidance based on a significantly reduced budget that the services had recently received from Deputy Defense Secretary Donald J. Atwood Jr. In a discussion with Cheney, who attended part of the meeting, Thurman argued that the Defense Policy Guidance provided the best vehicle for presenting this strategy and vision.

Powell emphatically rejected the call of Thurman and Gen. Edwin H. Burba Jr., commanding general, Forces Command, for a strategy based on the CINCs’ operational requirements. Powell also argued that threat-based analysis would not meet the requirements of changing world conditions, since it was impossible to predict where the US might become engaged. Instead, the focus needed to be on the forces needed to carry out US superpower responsibilities. To prevent a movement toward isolationism, DoD must convince the American people and Congress that this force structure was essential to US interests. Gen. John T. Chain, CINC, Strategic Air Command, endorsed Powell’s opposition to a threat-based strategy, pointing out that, in the past, when the US had reduced its forces in response to the disappearance of specific threats, it had then been unprepared when potential aggressors had challenged US interests.

No longer opposed to the concept of forward presence or to force reductions in Europe, Galvin supported Powell’s force concept and agreed that NATO needed a new strategy. But he thought that the strength of 75,000 proposed for post–Conventional Forces in Europe was insufficient. He maintained that despite Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s rhetoric, there had been no real change in the objectives of Soviet military policy and little change in Soviet military strength in Eastern Europe. Moreover, even in the aftermath of a Soviet withdrawal from the other Warsaw Pact countries, NATO would still have an important role to play. US forward presence would be necessary to promote European stability.

In contrast to the CINCs, the service chiefs had little to say. Vuono thought that Powell’s recommended numbers were so low that they required rethinking. Gen. Larry D. Welch, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, objected to the composition of Strategic Forces, wanting to augment the air leg of the triad. In what was to become the pattern of the Navy’s reaction over the next several months, Adm. Carlisle A.H. Trost, Chief of Naval Operations, did not comment, not responding even to the deliberately provocative question of defining the capital ship of the 21st century.

Turning to the Civilians

With the chiefs refusing seriously to address the need for force cuts and only willing to argue their positions individually with him rather than engaging in debate in
principal audience, Powell also hoped to win the support of the service chiefs. The chiefs believed that he was usurping their force planning prerogatives by proceeding with his Base Force plan despite their objections. In the hope of defusing service discontent, Powell asked Butler to present to Cheney by May 1. He had asked Wolfowitz to submit to Powell to open the DPRB sessions with presentations respectively on policy and force structure. The focus of further work on the “A View to 1994” briefing therefore became Powell’s presentation to the DPRB, where he hoped to win Cheney’s support for his position....

Over the months, Powell had continued his discussions with Wolfowitz. Although the undersecretary was still not as optimistic as Powell about the future course of the Soviet Union, by April he had become convinced of the magnitude of the changes there and had indicated to Powell his support for the Base Force concept....

On May 14, Wolfowitz presented his strategic overview to the DPRB. He reviewed the changes and the continuities in the strategic environment and their implications for force posture and force structure. Acknowledging the substantially reduced threat from the Soviet Union, he cautioned, however, that the future was uncertain and emphasized that his proposed approach took into account the possibility of a reversal in the strategic environment.

Powell had continued his discussions with each of the service chiefs. With the augmentation of the air leg of the triad, Welch had ceased his strong opposition to the Base Force, but in their POMs, the services had not accommodated Powell’s views. He had therefore become increasingly concerned that, if DoD did not agree to his approach to reducing forces, Congress would impose reductions below a level he regarded as prudent and at a rate that would destroy the effectiveness of the all-volunteer force. Hoping to influence both the DPRB discussions and the Congressional debate, he had discussed his own views on force structure with a reporter from the Washington Post. A detailed account of his views that appeared in that newspaper on May 7 had disclosed his belief that a 20 to 25 percent reduction in force size and military expenditures carried out over four to five years would not endanger national security. But he had emphasized that to carry out these reductions more quickly would “break” the armed forces. He had expressed his determination to get Cheney’s and the services’ agreement on a minimum force needed to meet US military requirements into the next century and to win Bush’s approval of this force structure.

On May 15, Powell presented his Base Force briefing

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to the DPRB. He underscored that his presentation was not a POM submitted in competition with the service POMs. Nor was the Base Force an alternative to a POM. Rather, he was proposing a strategy and a force concept that prescribed the minimum force necessary for the US to remain a superpower. DoD must adopt this force structure as the floor below which the armed forces could not go and still carry out their responsibilities, and it must fight for the Base Force’s acceptance.

Going further than Wolfowitz, Powell argued that the threat from the Soviet Union had disappeared. Therefore the military could not justify continuing to maintain a force structure based upon that threat. Unlike the service chiefs and the civilian leadership, who wished to proceed slowly in response to developments in Eastern Europe, he believed that the Soviet Union was undergoing a lasting structural transformation. Even though Soviet military power still posed a potential threat to the US, Soviet military policy would, in his view, be defensive and deterrent. Therefore, there was little likelihood of superpower conflict anywhere. But, as a result of the changes in the strategic environment, there would be a realignment of alliances, uncertainty, instability, and the likelihood of regional conflict. Hence, the US must remain a military superpower in order to ensure peace.

However, because of the public perception that the end of the Cold War would bring peace and increased stability, there would be unrelenting public and Congressional pressure to reduce defense spending. The Base Force provided the means for remaining a superpower while reducing forces in response to this pressure. As evidenced by Congressional proposals for greater reductions in defense funding, DoD could expect its budget to be cut faster and sooner than originally anticipated. Therefore, Powell concluded that they would have to reach the Base Force by 1994 instead of 1997 so that no service would be forced below its base. While reducing forces, they must also set priorities for investing in weapons systems and insure investment in the capabilities needed both for sustaining the Base Force and for reconstitution.

Initially, Powell believed that his presentation had not gone well. It was clear from what one participant described as the “pained look” on the faces of the service chiefs that they strongly opposed cutting forces below the level of their POMs, which were based on Cheney’s guidance of a 2 percent per annum reduction in real growth in the budget over the Six Year Defense Plan. Moreover, having reluctantly—and, they hoped, temporarily—accepted the need for force cuts, they did not wish to restructure the forces that would remain. Because of their resistance, Powell did not present all the details of his force structure recommendations. With Gen. Alfred M. Gray Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, taking the lead, the chiefs countered that Powell’s recommendations anticipated the continuation of favorable developments. Although the Navy POM proposed an active strength of 159,000 for the Marine Corps, Gray insisted that it could not reduce its strength below 180,000. The chiefs expressed reservations about Powell’s view of the future and advocated proceeding with greater caution. However, Wolfowitz, whose briefing had devoted more attention to the uncertainties of the future, had recommended essentially the same force levels—albeit a different target date. And he had shown how it would be possible, if events warranted, to reverse the process of force reductions.

In response to these initial briefings, Cheney asked for another presentation by Wolfowitz. The expanded briefing that the undersecretary and his staff prepared for Cheney incorporated several of Powell’s slides. Recommending a force concept that combined Powell’s Base Force and a crisis response–reconstitution strategy, the briefing argued that this force option provided the minimum force structure that the US could adopt without incurring undue risk. Wolfowitz and his staff believed, however, that reducing forces at the rate required to reach this level sooner than 1997 would damage the quality and readiness of the armed forces. Moreover, pacing reductions to reach the Base Force by 1997, rather than 1994, would, as Wolfowitz had shown earlier, allow for a reversal in the process if the strategic environment should change.

Acceptance of the Base Force

Cheney believed not only that Powell’s view of the future was too optimistic but also that it did not provide sufficient justification for maintaining the recommended force levels. OSD’s having provided for alternative futures gave him greater confidence that the recommended force structure was both adequate and justifiable. Under attack for presenting a budget that failed to respond to the changes that had taken place in the world, he endorsed the Base Force and the crisis response–reconstitution strategy as a package that could be used to establish and justify a floor under force cuts and show that DoD was responding to the altered strategic environment.

On June 6, Cheney for the first time publicly indicated that DoD might be willing to undertake major force reductions. He agreed to prepare for the White House–Congressional budget summit convened by Bush in May a report showing the budgetary impact of a 25 percent reduction in force structure carried out over 1991–95. The illustrative plan that Cheney submitted to the summit on June 19 provided for a force structure by the end of 1995 that was close to the Base Force. However,
The Base Force adopted by DoD was very close to Powell’s February 1990 projections.

according to Cheney’s notional plan, the 25 percent reduction in force structure would yield only a 10 percent reduction in DoD’s budget. Moreover, Cheney cautioned that the projected reductions in force structure assumed a continued diminution in the Soviet threat.

Then, on June 26, Cheney, Powell, and Wolfowitz presented DoD’s recommended strategy and force structure to Bush and his national security advisor, Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft (USAF, Ret.). Cheney reviewed the options developed by Wolfowitz’s office, and Powell presented a briefing on the Base Force without, however, elaborating on the details of force structure. Cheney then endorsed the crisis response—reconstitution strategy and the Base Force, and Bush indicated his support for the new strategy and force structure.

On Aug. 2, at the Aspen Institute in Colorado, Bush announced the new defense strategy and military structure. Bush acknowledged that the Cold War was drawing to a close and declared that the US must reshape its defense capabilities to the changing strategic circumstances.

Over the summer, Powell had continued his efforts to win the service chiefs to the Base Force, and Robinson had worked individually with the service programmers at the two-star level to reach J-8’s final force structure recommendations. Butler had then explained the recommendations to each of the service chiefs. [The lineup of chiefs had changed during the summer. Adm. Frank B. Kelso II had become CNO, replacing Trost. Gen. Michael Dugan replaced Welch as USAF Chief of Staff.]

Although his programmers were cooperating with J-8, Gray continued to resist reduction of the Marine Corps to the Base Force level. In private meetings with Powell, he argued that there was no justification for cutting his service since geography, not the Soviet threat, had determined its mission and hence its size. To demonstrate that the Base Force’s strength of 150,000 was sufficient for the Marine Corps to carry out its role in responding to regional contingencies, the Joint Staff turned to the scenarios being developed by J-5. Despite these efforts, Gray continued to press his case. Just before the CINCs Conference opened on Aug. 20, Powell informed the Commandant that he would increase the Base Force level. In private meetings with Powell, he argued that there was no justification for cutting his service to the Base Force than they previously had been....

Powell summed up his position by warning the service chiefs that they would not get their POM forces. His own figures were below the levels of the Army, Navy, and Air Force POMs and at the level of the Marine Corps POM, and he was not optimistic about the outcome of the budget summit negotiations. He believed that, regardless of how the Persian Gulf crisis affected Cheney’s thinking, Congressional participants in the negotiations would not agree to funding at the level of the service POMs....

With Powell’s and Cheney’s approval, J-8 during October and November worked closely with [Comptroller Sean O’Keefe’s] office to refine the details of the composition of the Base Force and to be certain that its components were correctly costed. Powell then reviewed the figures with O’Keefe and made some adjustments in composition. Toward the end of November, J-8 presented a briefing to Cheney comparing the funding needed for the Base Force and for various alternatives.... Cheney decided that he would stand by his endorsement of the Base Force.

Meanwhile, Vuono had accepted the Base Force. After the CINCs Conference, Powell and he had continued their discussions. In response to the Army Chief of Staff’s arguments on behalf of the Army POM figure of 14 active divisions, Powell countered that budgetary constraints might require reduction to 10. In late autumn, Vuono agreed to the Base Force size of 12. Gray, however, continued to resist reduction of the Marine Corps.

At a meeting of DoD’s Executive Committee on Nov. 29, Cheney directed the services to implement the Base Force. They were then given an opportunity to respond to his guidance, and their appeals resulted in some adjustments. The force projections submitted with DoD’s 1992–93 budget request in December and forwarded by Bush to Congress in February 1991 reflected these adjustments. Aiming to approximate the Base Force by the end of 1995, DoD projected for that date an active strength of 535,500 for the Army; 509,700 for the Navy; 437,200 for the Air Force; and 170,600 for the Marine Corps, for a total active strength of 1,653,000. Reserve strength would be 906,000.

There would be 12 active and six reserve (plus two cadre) Army divisions; 15 active and 11 reserve tactical fighter wings; and 451 ships, including 12 carriers. DoD anticipated that, by the end of 1997, additional reductions in active strength, principally in the Marine Corps and the Navy, would yield a Base Force with an active strength of 1,633,200, while there would be a slight drop in reserve strength to 904,000. Thus, the Base Force adopted by DoD was very close to Powell’s February 1990 projections of an active strength of 1.6 million and a reserve strength of 898,000....

**Convincing the Chiefs**

By the time of the CINCs Conference, it had become clear that the budget was unlikely to permit the force levels in the service POMs. Consequently, with the exception of Gray, the service chiefs were more recep-