



**Sixty years after it was forged, the famous Key West agreement is in for a basic reconsideration.**

# A New Look at Roles and Missions

By John T. Correll



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*James V. Forrestal.*

**R**oles and missions of the armed forces were not a problem until the 20th century. Before that, the Army fought on land and the Navy fought at sea and their actions seldom overlapped.

By World War II, that was no longer the case as Army and Navy forces fought together under joint theater command. However, it was chiefly military aviation, operating over both land and sea, that knocked down the old dividing lines of service responsibility.

Before the war ended, the Army Air Forces had come close to achieving the status of a third service, with membership on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The aircraft carrier had replaced the battleship as the principal ship of the Navy. Fearing a possible loss of naval aviation, the Navy opposed the National Security Act of 1947, which unified the armed forces and created the Air Force as a separate military service.

In March 1948, Secretary of Defense James V. Forrestal gathered the service Chiefs at Key West, Fla., in an attempt to settle the contentious issue of roles and missions. That conference, along with a follow-up meeting five months later in Newport, R.I., established the service roles and missions essentially as they are today.

Now, 60 years later, Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, believes the time has come to revisit the Key West agreement. At Skelton's instigation, the 2008 defense authorization bill directed the Pentagon to conduct a major review of roles and missions.

The DOD findings will be forwarded to Congress along with the budget submission in February as the basis for a fundamental review by Congress of defense functions.

"This review will carefully examine whether the Department of Defense is truly developing the core competencies and capabilities to perform the missions assigned to it, and whether these capabilities are being developed in the most joint and efficient way by the military services," Skelton said. "This question has not been seriously examined within the Pentagon for decades, with no truly significant changes made since the Key West agreement in 1948."

"Roles" and "missions" are often used interchangeably, but, to be precise about it, roles are the broad and enduring purposes of each service, as established in law by Congress. Since 1956, the legal basis for roles has been Title 10 of the US Code. From that starting point, the President and Secretary of Defense assign primary and collateral missions—the specific tasks that amplify those statutory responsibilities.

In a sense, Skelton is right, in that the basic roles and missions established at



*Dwight D. Eisenhower.*

Key West and Newport are still in effect. However, there have been numerous adjustments and additions—some of them major—over the years, and the current review merely is the latest in a series of proposals for change.

As was the case at Key West, all of these reviews have focused mainly on questions about airpower.

The early years of the postwar period saw the nation's air arm make peace with the Army, at least for a while. In 1943, the Army recognized airpower on a par with land power and said neither was an auxiliary of the other. Army leaders, including Gen. George C. Marshall and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supported the creation of the Air Force as a separate military service.

The means by which this was to be achieved was unification of the armed forces into a single organization with three co-equal branches, Army, Navy, and Air Force. The Navy was opposed. It had its

own air force—Naval Aviation—and its own ground force—the Marine Corps—and it wanted to keep them.

Navy leaders feared that naval aviation might be lost in unification, as had been the case in Britain in 1918 when London merged the Royal Naval Air Service into the Royal Air Force. The apprehension was not completely baseless. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, the postwar Chief of the Army Air Forces, had expressed interest in naval aviation joining the new Air Force, although he soon dropped the idea.

There was similar concern that the Army might try to take over the Marine Corps. Then and later, much was said about

The National Security Act assigned general roles to the services: land combat to the Army, naval combat to the Navy, and sustained offensive and defensive air combat and operations to the Air Force. The same day, Truman issued Executive Order 9877 adding specificity and detail on roles and missions. The Navy was responsible for control of the sea and the air above it and the Air Force was responsible for combat in the air, including strategic bombardment, airlift, and tactical support of ground and naval forces. Again the Navy objected. If missions were defined in terms of medium of operation (land, sea, air), that was a threat to naval aviation.

primary missions. The Air Force agreed that carrier aviation would be left with the Navy. Everyone further agreed the Marine Corps would not become “a second land Army.”

Then came a supplement to the agreement, crafted at the follow-on meeting at Newport in August. The supplement redefined the term “primary mission” in a way that would fail to exclude the Navy from a role in strategic air operations. Despite the Navy’s promise not to create a strategic air force, it charged ahead with a program to develop a “supercarrier” big enough and strong enough to handle nuclear bombers and challenge the Air Force B-36 for the strategic power projection mission. It also planned to field, by 1950, two aircraft, the AJ-1 Savage and P2V-3C Neptune, to carry nuclear bombs.

In April 1949, Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson, who succeeded Forrestal, canceled the supercarrier, setting off the so-called “Revolt of the Admirals.” The Navy organized a special unit, Op-23, that conducted an all-out, unrestrained attack on the B-36. The low point of this campaign was the appearance of an “anonymous” document alleging fraud and misconduct in the B-36 program. It was soon discovered that it had been written by an assistant to the undersecretary of the Navy, aided by the assistant head of Op-23.

The Navy overplayed its hand in the attack and Gen. Omar N. Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that the real issue was refusal by the Navy “in spirit as well as deed” to accept unification. Air Force arguments and the Navy’s loss of credibility carried the day. The B-36 went ahead and the supercarrier did not.

Marine Corps backers also pushed against the agreed roles and missions limits. In August 1950, Rep. Gordon L. McDonough (R-Calif.) wrote to President Truman proposing Marine representation on Joint Chiefs of Staff. Truman replied: “For your information, the Marine Corps is the Navy’s police force, and as long as I am President that is what it will remain. They have a propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin’s.”

McDonough made the letter public and Truman was forced to publicly “regret the unfortunate choice of language.” The Marine Corps has since attained JCS membership. Although it is still part of the Navy Department, it has effectively become a fourth service and a second land army, but the grief



*Sen. Barry Goldwater and Gen. David C. Jones.*

the special Marine Corps capability for amphibious warfare. In fact, the biggest amphibious operation of World War II, the D-Day landings in Normandy, had been conducted by the Army.

The Navy also recognized the primacy that nuclear weapons would have in the future, and it wanted to control some or all of the strategic power projection mission.

Congressional support for the Navy was strong. To secure unification, proponents of a separate Air Force made concessions regarding the control of naval airpower and the status of the Marine Corps.

On July 26, 1947, President Truman signed the National Security Act, creating the National Military Establishment with a Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and co-equal Air Force, Army, and Navy departments. (In 1949, the NME became the Department of Defense.) The first Secretary of Defense was Forrestal, who had been Secretary of the Navy.

Ironically, it was Forrestal, who had opposed unification when he was Secretary of the Navy, who was charged with restoring peace between the services and making the National Military Establishment work. In aid of that, he met with the Joint Chiefs on March 11 to 14 in Key West.

### **The Key West Agreement**

The Chiefs drafted a new roles and missions statement, a paper titled, “Functions of the Armed Forces and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” In turn, Truman revoked Executive Order 9877 and Forrestal issued the “functions paper” in its stead April 21. The paper, which became known as “the Key West agreement,” reaffirmed primary service responsibilities and assigned secondary or “collateral” missions.

The Navy agreed not to pursue its own strategic air force. However, the paper confirmed its authority to use airpower forces to attack specific targets, including inland targets, related to its



**Sen. Sam Nunn, Democrat of Georgia.**

heaped on Truman is well-remembered, and subsequent roles and missions reviews have treated the Marine Corps with great caution.

During the first decade under unification, DOD handled several mission realignments internally. The Air Force and Navy in 1948 merged their air transport services to form the Military Air Transport Service. The Army retained its light transports until transferring them to Air Force during the Vietnam War. A more complicated issue was whether guided missiles were artillery (Army), pilotless aircraft (Air Force), or something altogether different. The key point was resolved by several decisions in the 1950s that gave the ICBM mission to the Air Force. USAF thus had two-thirds of the strategic triad, with Navy submarine-launched ballistics missiles being the other third.

After his 1953 inauguration as President, Eisenhower became the driving force behind the next major change in centralization of authority. In a message to Congress, he declared “separate ground, sea, and air warfare is gone forever” and called for realignment of roles and missions.

The Air Force and the Army supported Eisenhower. The Navy and the Marine Corps opposed him. Spaatz, offering his opinion from retirement, proposed “complete integration” of the armed forces into a single service, but Eisenhower’s program did not go that far. As a popular President who had been a five-star general, Eisenhower had unbeatable credibility and Congress gave him most of what he asked for.

Under the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, the services retained their

legal, Title 10 roles. However, they lost their Presidentially assigned operational missions. Those were transferred to unified and specified commands on a geographical and functional basis.

Thereafter, the sole purpose of each armed service would be to organize, train, and equip forces for the combatant commands.

A new chain of command bypassed the services altogether. It ran from the President to the Secretary of Defense and through the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the unified and specified commands. The warmaking powers of the United States, it was said, were vested in the President, Secretary, and eight warlords—the heads of seven unified commands and one specified command, Strategic Air Command.

Over the years, the actual number of combatant commands has varied. Among the more important additions and deletions since 1958 have been these:

- US Central Command, formed in 1983. CENTCOM, which grew out of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, would take the lead in the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and later actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- US Space Command, formed in 1985. No single service was assigned the primary role for space. Space Command folded in 2002, with many of its missions transferred elsewhere.

- US Special Operations Command, formed in 1987. It was brought into being at the express direction of Congress and over opposition of the Joint Chiefs. SOCOM is unique among the unified commands in that its authority was statutorily stated—and thus protected—in Title 10.

- US Transportation Command, formed in 1987. It integrated the forces and operations of Air Force airlift and tankers, Navy sealift, and Army ground transport.

- Strategic Air Command, disestablished in 1992. A foundational Air Force entity, SAC was the most prominent of the specified commands. Its nuclear and nuclear-related missions, by and large, moved to...

- US Strategic Command, formed in 1992. Strategic Command assumed not only many of SAC’s duties but also absorbed many of those discharged by US Space Command until its demise in 2002.

In the opinions of many, the services continued to dominate the unified and specified commands, and the joint organization was ineffective in making

decisions. There were various calls for reform, but the critical push came from Air Force Gen. David C. Jones in his last days as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In testimony to the House Armed Services Committee in 1982, Jones said that commanders of the combatant commands and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs did not have the authority that they needed.

Among those who heard the testimony was Rep. Ike Skelton, then a junior member of the committee. He was impressed that Jones took a position opposed by the Department of Defense and most of his colleagues. Skelton recalled the moment in launching his program for review of roles and missions in 2008.

The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 gave theater commanders more control over the forces of all services, transferred some authority from the services to joint structures, and strengthened the position of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The legislation was forced by Congress on a reluctant Pentagon.

“The Goldwater-Nichols Act clarified the chain of command from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the unified commanders,” said Department of Defense historians Roger R. Trask and Alfred Goldberg. “The commanders in chief of the unified commands came directly under the Secretary—the Chairman and the JCS were not in the command chain.”

### **The Era of “Jointness”**

Goldwater-Nichols ushered in the era of “jointness.” It also required that every three years, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff submit a full report on roles and missions. In the first such report in 1989, Adm. William J. Crowe Jr. said that roles and missions were fundamentally sound as written.

When the Cold War ended, Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, led a charge to revisit and revise service roles and missions. In a speech to the Senate in July 1992, Nunn called for “a no-holds-barred, everything-on-the-table” review. He said the Key West agreement had left the job unfinished and that it was time to correct the “redundancy and duplication” that existed among the armed forces.

Nunn targeted 10 areas, the first and foremost of which was tactical airpower. How should the job be divided between land-based air and carrier air? Nunn said it was not a question of putting either the Navy or the Air Force completely out of



Rep. Ike Skelton, Democrat of Missouri.

the power projection business. It was a matter of force mix. With each of the four services operating tactical aircraft, he said “we must find ways to save billions of dollars with streamlining and eliminating the duplication in this area.”

The big issue (as framed by a *New York Times* editorial in November 1992) was “Who Needs Four Air Forces?” Nunn also pointed out—although it never became a matter for the headlines—that both the Army and the Marine Corps had light infantry divisions.

The Pentagon’s response was in a lengthy report in February 1993 by Gen. Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“Today, the fact that all [services] have airplanes and helicopters causes some to argue that America has ‘Four Air Forces,’ implying we have three more than we need,” Powell said. “In fact, America has only one air force, the United States Air Force, whose role is prompt and sustained offensive and defensive air operations. The other services have aviation arms essential to their specific roles and functions but which also work jointly to project America’s airpower.”

Powell stepped gingerly around the issue of two land armies: “The capabilities of the contingency and expeditionary forces in the Army and Marine Corps provide decision-makers with valuable alternatives and should be retained. The possibility of further decreases in the Army’s light infantry will be studied as force structure is reduced.”

Powell’s report did not sit well with lawmakers who had hoped to save billions with consolidations and realignments. In 1994, Congress instructed the Secretary of Defense to appoint a commission of

seven private citizens to study roles and missions. Lest there be any doubt about the focus, the Congressional Research Service produced a study, “Four US ‘Air Forces’: Overlap and Alternatives.”

### Conventional Wisdom Is Wrong

The commission got plenty of advice. In October 1994, two weeks before he retired, Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, the ever-amazing Air Force Chief of Staff, proposed that the Air Force close air support mission be transferred to the Army. As soon as McPeak was gone, the Air Force disavowed the idea and nothing came of it.

The commission’s report in May 1995 surprised its sponsors. It said that “popular perceptions of large-scale duplication among the services are wrong,” repeated Powell’s conclusion that “America has only one Air Force” but that “the other services have aviation arms essential to their specific roles and functions.” It advised that radical restructuring of operational functions was not needed.

That was the last high-visibility review of roles and missions until now.

In recent years, the Quadrennial Defense Review has become the main venue for scrutiny of DOD and the services. Language in Title 10 directs the JCS Chairman to assess roles and missions, consider “unnecessary duplication of effort among the armed forces,” and provide that assessment to the Secretary of Defense in time for inclusion in a QDR.

The three QDRs to date—conducted in 1997, 2001, and 2005—have said nothing of consequence about roles and missions. That does not mean no issues or questions have arisen. For example, the Air Force has repeatedly sought primary responsibility for space and for unmanned aerial vehicles, and has repeatedly been rebuffed. Responsibilities are scattered and unclear on cyber warfare and on intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance. The armed forces are increasingly involved in peacekeeping and non-military roles that look much like “nation building,” which had previously been disclaimed as a proper mission for the military.

The current inquiry began in July 2007 when Skelton’s House Armed Services Committee created a panel on Roles and Missions, chaired by Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.). Skelton concurrently moved

to put a requirement for a major Pentagon roles and missions review in the defense authorization bill for 2008. The bill calls for another such report to Congress in 2011 with reports every four years thereafter.

DOD’s internal review, launched in May, has been conducted by seven roles and missions teams, which looked at duplication of capabilities and efforts among the services as well as six other specific issues: unmanned aerial systems, intratheater airlift, cyber operations, irregular warfare, internal department organization and responsibilities, and interagency roles and missions capabilities. The Pentagon hopes to finish its study in late November, work it with Administration and Presidential transition team members in December, and turn it in to Congress before the FY 2010 budget is submitted in February.

Meanwhile, Cooper’s panel in January published a report, consisting largely of a collection of perspectives and articles and columns reprinted from newspapers and magazines, but there are indications of the panel’s view. Even though “the military has been left carrying the burden of the failures of our national security institutions,” the panel said, “our military has resisted change just as they have past efforts at reform. The Air Force and Navy are re-emphasizing more traditional threats and downplaying the unexpected threats we face today. The other two services, the Army and Marines, try to tinker at the margins of their mission even as they suffer most from the current overstretch.”

Cooper hit a similar theme in an article in *Armed Forces Journal* in March 2008. Despite a budget of \$600 billion a year, he said, the Pentagon “still produces a military that is overstretched. At least part of the problem is a system focused on creating the ideal military establishment to fight large-scale conventional wars such as World War II instead of the smaller, complex conflicts we face today.”

These thoughts resemble the emphasis on current operations and irregular warfare by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and the chastisement of the services, mainly the Air Force, for “next-war-itis,” the Gates term for excessive concern with potential threats and conventional conflicts of the future. No doubt more will be heard about that in the coming round on roles and missions. ■

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