

**THE MISSION
WAGING WAR AND KEEPING PEACE WITH AMERICA'S
MILITARY¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JULIE LONG²

There are many differences between the U.S. wars in Vietnam and Iraq, but one stunning similarity is the administrations' reliance on U.S. armed forces to bring radical social change to a country as alien to most soldiers as the planet Mars.³

Dana Priest, author of *The Mission, Waging War and Keeping Peace with America's Military*, seems to have spent the better part of 1998 through 2003 traveling the globe with everyone from four-star generals to grunts.⁴ Her readers are much the better for it. In *The Mission*, Ms. Priest provides highly engrossing, descriptive accounts of post-Cold War U.S. military engagements, coupled with timely and important observations about how the United States puts its foreign policy into practice. While the book's criticisms are primarily aimed at policy makers and political leaders above the level of most military leaders—and, despite some limitations, such as digressions into stories that lend little to Ms. Priest's overall theme⁵ and her failure to sufficiently develop her alternative to military peacekeeping—in many ways, *The Mission* reads like a very engaging “lessons learned” for service members involved in peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations.

¹ DANA PRIEST, *THE MISSION, WAGING WAR AND KEEPING PEACE WITH AMERICA'S MILITARY* (2004).

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³ PRIEST, *supra* note 1, at 401-02.

⁴ *See id.* at 19-20, 407.

⁵ *See id.* at 292-302. As Michael O'Hanlon notes in his review of *The Mission*, several articles that Ms. Priest wrote for the *Washington Post*, supplemented by research she conducted while on a sabbatical with the U.S. Institute of Peace, form the basis for the book. *See* Michael O'Hanlon, *Taking the Lead*, The Brookings Institute, available at <http://www.brook.edu/views/articles/ohanlon/20030901.pdf>, at 227 (last visited Dec. 7, 2004). This may help to account for such digressions.

Ms. Priest, a *Washington Post* reporter for more than fifteen years,⁶ is a consummate storyteller. She colorfully brings to life the exploits of military members in hot spots around the world in an effort to illustrate what she sees as wrong with U.S. foreign policy execution today.⁷ Indeed, Ms. Priest believes that much of what she sees is flawed. She vividly describes what she terms the U.S. political leadership's lazy over-reliance on a powerful, yet misunderstood military.⁸ As a consequence of this misplaced proclivity to choose what she terms the easy "quick fix"⁹ of military engagement, Ms. Priest contends that the United States has failed to grasp a historic opportunity to leverage its unprecedented preeminence and "lead a messy world toward a more stable peace."¹⁰ Ultimately, *The Mission* is Ms. Priest's attempt to demonstrate that nation-building is best accomplished by civilians. She pointedly notes that although the United States has struggled through more than "[t]welve years of reluctant nation-building . . . [it] still [has not] spawned an effective civilian corps of aid workers, agronomists, teachers, engineers – a real peace corps – to take charge of postwar reconstruction . . ."¹¹ According to Ms. Priest, the consequences of this failure are grave and run the gamut from failed policies¹² to human rights abuses¹³ and even to heinous crimes.¹⁴

Ms. Priest broadly argues that following the fall of the Soviet Union, U.S. political leaders failed to develop a strategic plan to deal with the

⁶ See Washington Post, *Q&A with Dana Priest*, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/talk/priest.htm> (last visited Dec. 7, 2004).

⁷ See PRIEST, *supra* note 1, at 395-405 (describing activities of U.S. Soldiers in Iraq and critiquing the policies of the Bush administration).

⁸ See *id.* at 18. Ms. Priest is bi-partisan in her assessment that the U.S. political leadership failed to understand or respect the military, reporting that "[f]or such a smart politician, Clinton had been so dumb in the beginning regarding his relations with people in uniform." *Id.* at 42. Ms. Priest reports that the military was constantly second-guessed under Secretary Rumsfeld's leadership. See *id.* at 24. She further notes that according to General Hugh Shelton, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary Rumsfeld and his staff "weren't willing to take anything for granted. If you said the sun was up, they raised the blind and said, 'Let us see.'" *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 390.

¹² See, e.g., *id.* at 195-215 (describing failures in U.S. anti-drug and military policies in Colombia).

¹³ See, e.g., *id.* at 216-43 (describing U.S. military involvement with elements of the Indonesian military that she asserts subverted congressional requirements related to human rights).

¹⁴ See, e.g., *id.* at 343-65 (describing the rape of a young Kosovar girl by a U.S. service member).

difficult issues confronting the United States in the post-Cold War world.¹⁵ Even prior to Communism's fall, and with little public debate, politicians systematically had degraded the capacity of the U.S. civilian foreign policy apparatus, leaving it unable to pursue diplomatic solutions to the challenges arising out of the demise of the bi-polar world.¹⁶ Ms. Priest contends that into this vacuum grew a powerful military establishment, headed by the "CinCs," the commanders of the Pentagon's five regional commands,¹⁷ who unlike their civilian foreign policy counterparts possessed both the will and the resources to "shape" the world.¹⁸

Ms. Priest brings her thesis to life through a series of vignettes that take the reader on an odyssey of travel, including forays with Special Forces troops in Nigeria and Afghanistan, and with CinCs in Indonesia, the Middle East, and Colombia.¹⁹ Combining legislative and political

¹⁵ *Id.* at 13-14 (placing equal blame on both the executive and legislative branches).

¹⁶ *See id.* at 45-47. For example, Ms. Priest reports that during the 1970s and 1980s, Congress slashed the State Department's operations budget by twenty percent. *See id.* at 45.

¹⁷ The acronym "CinC," commander in chief, previously was applied to the commanders of the five regional commands. *See id.* at 29. Ms. Priest reports that Secretary Rumsfeld disliked this title, stating, "There is only one CinC under the Constitution and law, and that is POTUS [the President of the United States]." *Id.* Rumsfeld subsequently issued a memo changing the CinCs' title to "commander." *See id.* Ms. Priest chose to use the term CinC in her book; for the sake of consistency, this review does so as well.

¹⁸ *See id.* at 16-17. Ms. Priest asserts that the military's seeming foreign policy take-over accelerated under the Bush administration. *See id.* at 396-405. She argues, for instance, that if President Bush were serious about working to instill democracy in the Middle East

he would have transferred Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to the State Department, where the friendly, former academic could turn his unbounded zeal for a democratic revolution in the Middle East into political and diplomatic—not military—initiatives. Instead, Wolfowitz spent his days trying to figure out how to use military operations to achieve political reform.

Id. at 404. Interestingly, Mr. Wolfowitz published an op-ed piece in the September 16, 2004 edition of the *New York Times*, in which he calls on the Indonesian government to release a political journalist charged with criminal defamation and to strengthen its rule of law and progress toward full democracy. Paul Wolfowitz, *The First Draft of Freedom*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 16, 2004, at A33. This remarkable article supports Ms. Priest's observation that the Defense Department seems to have moved beyond winning the nation's wars to carrying out the nation's foreign political policies as well. *See* PRIEST, *supra* note 1, at 16-17, 396-405.

¹⁹ *See, e.g., id.*, 175-215 (describing U.S. military activities in Nigeria, Afghanistan, Indonesia, the Middle East, and Colombia).

research with anecdotes gleaned from numerous interviews, Ms. Priest first explores the historical development of the regional commands and the CinCs' forty-year climb to their current positions of power.²⁰ Ms. Priest points out the uncomfortable fact that the CinCs, dubbed by Ms. Priest as "proconsuls to the empire,"²¹ command resources and retinues that far outweigh those of their State Department colleagues.²² In addition to dedicated aircraft,²³ the CinCs have "colonels and majors by the dozen . . . [who] plan exercises, share technical assistance, promote the sale or donation of American military equipment, or resolve policy disputes"²⁴ Perhaps most importantly, and in most stark contrast to the civilian foreign policy agencies, the CinCs have at their disposal Special Forces and conventional troops who can be mobilized to carry out the nation's policy objectives.²⁵ Ms. Priest writes, "Special forces were often the tool of default when U.S. policymakers abandoned more difficult alternatives, such as long-term economic development or political reform won th[r]ough creative diplomatic sticks and carrots."²⁶ As a result, the CinCs and their troops, rather than the civilian agents who are actually charged with carrying out U.S. foreign policy, are often the face of the United States in foreign countries,²⁷ a fact that Ms. Priest asserts gravely distorts policy outcomes.²⁸

²⁰ See *id.* at 66-77.

²¹ See *id.* at 61. Ms. Priest apparently takes this term from an interview with former CinC General Anthony Zinni who Ms. Priest reports as stating he had become "a modern-day proconsul, descendant of the warrior-statesmen who ruled the Roman Empire's outlying territory, bringing order and ideals from a legalistic Rome." *Id.* at 70. The term "proconsul" refers to officials of ancient Rome. Tiscali Reference, *Consul (Roman History)*, Tiscali, at <http://www.itscali.co.uk/reference/encyclopaedia/hutchinson/m0013586.html> (last visited Dec. 13, 2004). An assembly of the Roman people each year elected two consuls to serve as chief magistrates of the Roman Republic. See *id.* The two shared full civil authority in Rome and were the chief military commanders. See *id.* After serving a one-year term, a consul ordinarily then served as proconsul of a province, the Roman government's representative and local military commander. See *id.*

²² See PRIEST, *supra* note 1, at 71.

²³ See *id.* Ms. Priest states that "a CinC's ability to move around in the world is his greatest intelligence weapon." *Id.* at 76. In contrast, at the State Department only the Secretary of State has a dedicated aircraft, and all other diplomats fly scheduled airlines or hitch rides on military aircraft. See *id.* at 71.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ See *id.* at 17, 74-75.

²⁶ *Id.* at 17.

²⁷ See *id.* at 85-91, 112-14. One commentator notes in her review of *The Mission* that Ms. Priest warns of "a dangerous trend toward having the military handle quasi-diplomatic missions, filling a vacuum left by underfunded civilian agencies," and quotes Ms. Priest as asserting that "The face of America is becoming a face with a helmet on." Louise Gilmore Donohue, *Tracking the Military is Her Mission*, UNIVERSITY OF

In Colombia, for example, Ms. Priest writes that forty years of civil war, “[c]orrupt government officials, impoverished peasants, and lush jungles . . . conspired to make Colombia a hospitable place for coca farmers and drug traffickers,”²⁹ and the resultant cocaine fueled “an American tragedy with an unending rippling effect.”³⁰ She points out that the drug crisis rested on civil and economic under-pinnings, and crucially, that the local regional leadership was historically wary of U.S. military intervention.³¹ In spite of this, Ms. Priest asserts that the only solution U.S. political leaders truly backed was a military one.³² She reports that even General George Joulwan, then-commander of the U.S. Southern Command, “envisioned the solution as more than just a military attack.”³³ He had sufficient commandos, fast planes, and law enforcement agents to break up the drug cartels, but lamented, “Where was the crop-substitution program? Where were the new roads to bring the crops to market? Where was the political dialogue to allow guerrillas to disarm and the wars to end . . . ?”³⁴ Ms. Priest contends that such elements were absent from the U.S. toolbox, because the U.S. political leadership lacked the coherence, foresight, and will to pull it all together.³⁵ In the end, after almost two decades of U.S. involvement, Colombia is little better than a failed state, engulfed in a tripartite civil war, while the U.S. goal of eradicating the drug trade remains unachieved.³⁶

CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ REVIEW, Fall 2003, available at http://review.ucsc.edu/fall-03/alumni_profile.html (last visited Dec. 13, 2004).

²⁸ See PRIEST, *supra* note 1, at 403-05.

²⁹ *Id.* at 196.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ See *id.* at 197-201.

³² See *id.* at 196-97.

³³ *Id.* at 205.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* at 209. Ms. Priest reports, for example, that under “Plan Colombia,” hammered out in 2000 by General Charles E. Wilhelm, then-commander of the U.S. Southern Command, and Colombian President Andres Pastrana as a comprehensive effort to strengthen government, promote regional development, and curtail drug production, of an available \$1.3 billion, \$519 million went to train three Colombian battalions and to purchase Blackhawk helicopters, while only \$3 million was earmarked to support the peace process aimed at ending the fighting between government troops, paramilitary forces, and insurgents. See *id.* at 208-09. Moreover, in spite of the huge expenditure of U.S. money for “Plan Colombia,” the Bush administration’s top civilian policy-making positions for Latin America and counter-narcotics efforts remained unfilled for more than a year. See *id.* at 209.

³⁶ See *id.*

At the heart of the book lies Ms. Priest's extensive treatment of U.S. actions in Kosovo, where her enormously detailed depictions frequently follow even the hour-by-hour actions of individual Soldiers.³⁷ In one instance, Ms. Priest describes an episode that took place in November 2003 in which a group of local Serb women approached her while she accompanied a squad of infantry Soldiers on a patrol in Vitina, Kosovo.³⁸ The women handed Ms. Priest a four-page declaration requesting three sewing machines and asked that it be presented to the U.S. lieutenant colonel commanding the forces in Vitina.³⁹ This document, Ms. Priest contends, "was a spontaneous, entrepreneurial request that any development expert or aid worker would have seized upon. Not the military: 'Sewing machines! We don't do sewing machines!' scoffed the battalion's bullet-headed lieutenant colonel when I inquired about the declaration his lieutenant had passed along to him."⁴⁰ To Ms. Priest, the encounter epitomizes the ultimate futility of using Soldiers as nation-builders, and "the consequences of substituting generals and Green Berets for diplomats, and nineteen-year-old paratroopers for police and aid workers on nation-building missions."⁴¹

It is in this portion of the narrative, however, where the book's flaws are most evident. At times, Ms. Priest's interesting and compelling thesis becomes lost in the storytelling, as she seems to include material because it makes for a good story, rather than for its contribution to her theme. For example, Ms. Priest devotes an entire chapter to the experiences of Drita Perezic, an Albanian-American hired by the United States to work as a translator in Kosovo.⁴² Ms. Priest poignantly describes that Ms. Perezic, although born and raised in the United States, was frequently mistaken for a local Albanian and at times was verbally abused and humiliated as a result.⁴³ At other points, she writes that Ms. Perezic was often dismayed and frustrated that the Soldiers frequently

³⁷ See, e.g., *id.* at 148-65 (describing the actions of Special Forces A Teams in the early days of the war in Afghanistan).

³⁸ See *id.* at 14.

³⁹ See *id.* at 15-16.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 16.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 14.

⁴² See *id.* at 292.

⁴³ See, e.g., *id.* at 295 (describing an incident in which a Soldier, mistaking Ms. Perezic for a local Albanian, shouted at her "Who gave you the right to speak English?").

failed to understand the context and historical setting of their mission in Kosovo.⁴⁴

Perhaps Ms. Priest intended this chapter to illustrate her point that however well-meaning they may be, U.S. Soldiers simply lack the skills and inclination to successfully rebuild a war-torn country. Unfortunately, she lingers too long on instances in which Soldiers were rude or coarse toward Ms. Perezic⁴⁵ and focuses too intensely on Ms. Perezic's emotional reaction to the devastation she encounters in Kosovo.⁴⁶ As a result, the reader is distracted from Ms. Priest's overall message, and the chapter becomes more an interesting anecdote than a contribution to the book as a whole.

Likewise, Ms. Priest devotes the better part of two chapters to events that culminated in the rape and murder of an eleven-year old Kosovar girl by a U.S. Soldier.⁴⁷ This story is part of a larger one about the exploits of a U.S. infantry battalion in Kosovo⁴⁸ that is virtually a case study on how the leadership of an otherwise well-trained, motivated unit can fail in the amorphous world of peacekeeping. Ms. Priest's riveting and graphic account of the girl's ordeal is first-class reporting.

She describes with intense detail, for example, one company's efforts to unscramble the web of organized crime in a Kosovar town.⁴⁹ The leaders of the criminal gang were intertwined with the town's civic leadership. These figures used their positions to foment ethnic discord in an attempt to hide illegal activities, thereby undermining the units' peacekeeping efforts.⁵⁰ In response, the Soldiers began an intensive intelligence gathering effort, sometimes resorting to physical violence and intimidation to gain information about suspects. As Ms. Priest recounts, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Frank Ronghi, later convicted of the rape

⁴⁴ See *id.* at 299. Ms. Priest notes, for example, that most of the Soldiers Ms. Perezic worked with knew nothing about Kosovo, and as a result, were forced to rely on her as a kind of "cultural '911.'" See *id.* at 297.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., *id.* at 297 (describing a scene in which an Army lieutenant colonel yells at Ms. Perezic because she asked him, at the urging of other Soldiers, when he would become a "full bird").

⁴⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 296-300 (describing how Ms. Perezic reacted when confronted with death and violence while on patrols with U.S. Soldiers)

⁴⁷ See *id.* at 320-65.

⁴⁸ See *id.* at 303-84.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 320-42.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

and murder of the young local girl, participated in many of the more questionable incidents.⁵¹

Unfortunately, the details of SSG Ronghi's crime receive such prominent treatment⁵² that the reader is left to draw the conclusion that this crime, like the other policy failures Ms. Priest recounts, is a consequence of leadership failure or poor foreign policy choices, rather than the vicious acts of an individual criminal. If Ms. Priest intends this conclusion, it is glaringly irresponsible and terribly lazy analysis in an otherwise thoughtful book. If, on the other hand, she does not intend the reader to draw this conclusion, then Ms. Priest unfortunately allowed her journalist's eye for a good story to get the better of her.

More significantly, Ms. Priest uses the flaws in the United States' execution of the Kosovo mission, especially those of the infantry unit she closely follow, to advocate that the United States should establish "a Peace Corps for the 21st Century,"⁵³ a body of civilian development and law enforcement professionals who would replace Soldiers in international nation-building efforts.⁵⁴ Yet in this argument, Ms. Priest seems to overlook her own point. While she successfully documents the weaknesses of the international efforts in Kosovo, she provides nothing to back up her assertion that civilians would have been more successful than Soldiers. Ms. Priest, in fact, points out in her narrative that the civilian agencies at work in Kosovo were perhaps even less successful than the Soldiers in bringing relief to the needy.⁵⁵ She tellingly documents, for example, the ineptitude and complacency of the civilian U.N. Mission in Kosovo Police (UNMIK-P), a "mishmash" of officers from over fifty countries with little police training, no common language, and little interest in risking their lives in Kosovo.⁵⁶

⁵¹ See *id.* at 334-39.

⁵² See *id.* at 343-65. Indeed, Ms. Priest fills more pages recounting the details of this crime than she did describing the role of the CinCs, a crucial aspect of her overall theme. See *id.* at 61-77.

⁵³ See *The Connection: A Peace Corps for the 21st Century* (WBUR radio broadcast, March 12, 2004), available at http://www.theconnection.org/shows/2004/03/20040312_b_main.asp (last visited Dec. 13, 2004).

⁵⁴ See PRIEST, *supra* note 1, at 390.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., *id.* at 325-26, 378-84 (describing the inability of the Italian police assigned in Kosovo to deal effectively with organized crime, and the utter failure of various intergovernmental organizations to cope with the problems of internal refugees and disputes over housing).

⁵⁶ See *id.* at 369-71.

Indeed, despite Ms. Priest's claims, what *The Mission* teaches is not that civilians are necessarily better suited to nation-building than Soldiers, although this may be the case. Instead, the book stands for the essential proposition that success in such missions requires political will and focused leadership at many levels to follow through with the difficult tasks of rebuilding civil society once the fighting has stopped. In the aftermath of major combat operations in Iraq, this central message of *The Mission* is perhaps even more compelling than it was when the book was first published in 2003. Ms. Priest offers a remarkable picture of U.S. service members' actions across the globe, and her concept of a civilian corps designed to rebuild in the aftermath of war or the wake of a failed state deserves more attention. In the meantime, U.S. Soldiers will no doubt continue to engage in peacekeeping and nation-building around the globe. *The Mission* offers a close-up view of that world, and it should be on every military leader's reading list.

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