Book Review

Michael Barzelay and Colin Campbell.
Preparing for the Future: Strategic Planning in the U.S. Air Force.
Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

This book is a very useful case study in one of the most difficult areas of government policy development – strategic military planning. This craft must arrange for military preparedness to deal with contingencies in the near and distant future. During the uncertain time from the end of the Cold War to the start of the "war on terror," the strategic planning process was undertaken with particular verve and enthusiasm. Barzelay and Campbell provide an absorbing account of this remarkable period in US military history and their work has many lessons to teach. Moreover, these are not lessons that are exclusively applicable to contemporary defence and military policy making. In fact, much of what is reported and thoughtfully analyzed is of relevance to practitioners in any large public sector organization – especially those whose interest is in transforming obdurate bureaucracies in the name of revitalizing government agencies and, perhaps, even the role of government itself.

The situation of the military is especially difficult, of course. Successful strategic planning requires that at least three major factors must be taken into account. None of them are easily predictable, if they are foreseeable at all. They include: (1) geopolitical considerations including attention to potential threats to national security as well as opportunities for engagement for the purpose of extending influence over foreign governments; (2) intensely complicated and fast-paced technological innovations in communications and weaponry that permit increased surveillance of external powers and more precise application of the force deemed necessary to achieve victories; and, (3) the exigencies of a domestic political economy which may support or decline to support armed conflict, and which may choose at any time to increase or reduce the budgets required to maintain the personnel and machinery of diplomacy, intimidation and war.

Were this not enough, it is difficult to speak of US diplomacy and military strategy without being buffeted by the events of the past five years. The fabrication of evidence in support of the threat that Saddam Hussein allegedly posed to the Middle East and to the United States, the false claim of a link between Iraq and Al-Qaeda, the failure of the Pentagon to anticipate the opposition that would arise once the ground war was easily won, and the incredible absence of planning for the inevitable contingencies during the prolonged American occupation cloud any sober assessment of the US management of the "new world order." The abject failure to comprehend the competing regional factions in the Middle East and connect all of it to the core problem of Israel and Palestine, make a mockery of efforts to achieve peace and stability, much less to devise a strategy for relentless conflict. Before discussing the book here under review, therefore, it is useful to

recall the state of strategic thinking immediately after President George H. W. Bush's "first" Gulf War, which is also the approximate time when Barzelay and Campbell's study begins.

Following initial military success, then-US Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney spoke about the decision not to overthrow Saddam Hussein once the victory was complete and Iraqi forces had fled Kuwait:

> " … the question in my mind is, how many additional American casualties is Saddam worth? And the answer is, not that damned many. So, I think we got it right, both when we decided to expel him from Kuwait, but also when the President made the decision that we'd achieved our objectives and we were not going to go get bogged down in the problems of trying to take over and govern Iraq."

His observations were followed by then-Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell:

> "I would be very surprised if another Iraq occurred … I'm running out of demons. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."

Finally, we can recall the words of General John Galvin, then-NATO Supreme Commander:

> "For the last 40 years we've faced a palpable threat. This is an aberration. Historically, people have looked at national security in terms of stability. No matter where we look right now, we don't see very much stability."

Assuming these men were being candid, it is plain that times have certainly changed. The consensus then, however, appeared to be that no threat comparable to that of the Soviet Union – the recently retired "evil empire" of the day – was apt to emerge. Regional conflicts, moreover, were no longer to be exploited as "proxy wars." Instead, the US leadership was thinking about reducing its overall military profile, declining the temptation to involve itself in minor skirmishes and various genocides, and relying instead on a technologically advanced, rapid deployment forces, capable of responding quickly and effectively to any foreign threat, but no longer dependent on a large and involuntary army set to be deployed in a European theatre of war.

This geopolitical outlook was also given an unwelcome but nonetheless significant boost by the politics of debt that was ushered in during the administration of Ronald Reagan, and which has now been massively increased by the enormous deficits visited on the US economy by the current government. True, for a brief period under President Clinton, the bleeding of US economic power was staunched; however, general problems with foreign financing, negative balance of trade numbers and, of course, the staggering costs of the latter-day conflict in Iraq have made it difficult for any branch of government to negotiate the maintenance of its service, must less its expansion. As Barzelay and Campbell remind

us, the "ever-expanding surpluses" during the second Clinton administration changed "the focus of discourse over budget issues … from a politics of constraint to one of choice"; since then, however, for both fiscal and ideological reasons, the attack on government spending has increased, the once tempting "peace dividend" has been revoked and the depleted military seems unable to recoup the losses needed to properly equip its uniformed personnel, to say nothing of caring for its injured survivors. The negative effects are pervasive even during what Gore Vidal has sensibly called an era "of perpetual war."

This dismal state of affairs was not always as depressing to those inclined toward thinking of a healthy and effective Air Force. One of the mantras of the strategic military planners whom Barzelay and Campbell discuss was the need to concentrate on building a technologically sophisticated military force with extraordinarily accurate and devastating fire power and with light, flexible and numerically reduced armed forces. The late philosopher Jean Beaudrillard won praise for putting in print the description of the first Iraq war as a simulacrum of actual combat, a videogame version of warfare; though no supporter of brazen imperialism, his thinking had long been embraced by many senior military officials. Smart bombs, satellite-based intelligence gathering and overwhelmingly powerful "ordnance" was what the new Air Force "entrepreneurs" had in mind to replace the common soldier. Soldiers, sailors, marines and pilots, whose primary role had been to fight their way through what are commonly called the "meat grinders" of combat, would soon be to "mop up" once the major battles had been won by remote control.

As future Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld would later demonstrate, however, the neoliberal ideology of downsizing and outsourcing in the private sector would be applied to the armed forces with ghastly but sadly predictable results. Meat grinding is still the essence of battle when ambitions run toward actual territorial control. In the beginning, however, Donald Rumsfeld's close friend and political ally Dick Cheney was in a position to initiate changes. In 1990, Mr. Cheney put the new management strategy into effect when he announced a 25% cut in military personnel including a reduction in the army from 18 to 12 active divisions, in the Air Force from 24 to 15 fighter wings, in the Navy from 14 carrier groups to 12, and in the Marines from 3 to 2⅔ active divisions. These reductions were significant, but they signalled little actual reduction in defense spending. The funds were to be allocated to the design and development of high technology weaponry, not least that which was to be deployed in space.

More interesting than Mr. Cheney's early commitment to a "leaner and meaner" military is the coverage given to US defense planning in the popular press in the early 1990s. On 14 October, 1991, for instance, *U. S. News and World Report* fretted that the US military was employing obsolete plans with antiquated rationales. No immediate enemy of consequence was foreseen. The only reason to justify extra defense spending was said to be the fact that US weapons were nearing the end of their service life. It is against that background more than the current era of adventurism under the symbolic strategy of a war on terror, that Barzelay and Campbell's book must be read. The actions undertaken under the administration of President George W. Bush may one day be understood as an

aberration in themselves; at the least, it shifted the ground upon which their foremost strategic planners stood. If nothing else, it is apparent that there recently has been little evidence of planning – strategic or otherwise – and that the efforts of Air Force leaders to prepare for the future have temporarily been set aside or at least untested, perhaps (some fear) awaiting an opportunity to display their versatility and destructiveness in a future conflict with Iran.

In the meantime, it ought not to be thought that the organizational changes in the US Air Force during the 1990s were ineffective or unsuccessful. We can take some solace in the fact that evaluating innovation should not, at least theoretically, be difficult. It would seem necessary only to identify what a particular innovation was intended to accomplish, determine whether or not that goal was achieved and identify and balance any negative consequences of the innovation with the advantages gained by achieving the goal. It should be a matter of cost-benefit analysis, pure and simple. That no final assessment of the reinvention of the Air Force has been made is, perhaps, only a matter of time. Other topics have come forward and demand attention.

So, although real life is rarely simple, it remains fair to say that the assessment of innovation may ideally involve straightforward calculations. Especially in civilian work, procedures such as adding up the number of dollars spent and counting the number of "satisfied clients" requires relatively easy arithmetic. Innovations that allow an agency to do more with less and make everybody happy in the process are confidently applauded. The matter can, however, quickly become more complicated, especially when competing human interests are at stake (as they almost always are). This is especially true of military matters in an increasingly ambiguous world. (Today's villains – Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, for example – were once trusted allies; which contemporary allies will revert to the role of villains remains unclear.)

In assessing military planning, it appears, projected effectiveness anticipated in times of relative peace can quickly be superseded as enemies refuse to be defeated, body bags become more visible and participants in struggles switch sides. Unlike departments of commerce or welfare, the military cannot easily identify "satisfied clients"; in fact, customer approval seems a thoroughly inappropriate measure of success. Adding up numbers (dollars spent, numbers of combat-ready pilots trained, bombs dropped, casualties inflicted and so on) is generally easier than determining whether specific innovations in technology or fighting methods, but such calculations may ultimately have little to do with ensuring enhanced national security, to say nothing of a country's overall quality of life.

Paradoxically, despite the difficulty in developing measurable data by which to judge performance, no US governmental agency need be more concerned with effective and rapid response to changing conditions than the military. No US organization is better placed to take advantage of "wars and rumours of wars" than the armed forces. None is held more accountable for preserving the integrity and security of American soil, no matter what the vagaries and exigencies of domestic power plays and global turmoil.

Despite abundant evidence that a plan for the "new American century," including the attack on Iraq had been envisioned by President Bush's team even before the selection of the president by the US Supreme Court, it is hard to imagine that it was foremost in the minds of those who sought to manage the Air Force in the first decade after the implosion of the USSR. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the (temporary) standing of the United States as the singular superpower make the study of the US military and defence policy in the crucial last decade of the previous century even more compelling than usual. Prior to the second Gulf War, a number of important conflicts had come to the attention of the US State and Defense departments, but aggressive intervention was generally declined. So, nothing much was done about genocide in Rwanda, slaughter in East Timor and so on; only persistent tensions in the Balkans and the Middle East gave the US an orchard of discord from which to "cherry-pick" its battles, and late intervention in what is euphemistically called "the former Yugoslavia" showed that, on occasion, it would be willing to pick at least one.

With the Cold War over, new problems needed to be defined and these, once defined, required new solutions. Perhaps new problems had to be invented for an expensive "military-industrial complex" with no immediate enemy to justify its existence, much less its expansion. In any case, a time for vigorous and creative innovation was at hand.

Prescient observers and martial personnel understood that regional and often ethnically based "brushfires" could and probably would be an enduring feature of international relations for some time. They also understood that the nagging Israeli-Palestinian question could become almost unmanageable given the right (or, rather, the wrong) circumstances, and some even understood that, although American hegemony seemed unquestioned, it was not guaranteed in perpetuity. An opportunity was there for those with the wit and the will to seize it. Some were there; some seized it.

Preparing for the Future does an excellent job of assessing how one US military service responded to "postcommunism" and its consequences. Unlike most case studies which feature intriguing personalities and present interesting yarns, but offer no insights or analysis capable of application to other circumstances (i.e., are unscientific), this book at least hints at the sort of things that public bureaucracies can do to enhance their durability, their reputations, their political influence and their budgetary prosperity as well, presumably, as to promote the public good.

The authors take as their subject matter the history of the US Air Force's efforts to manage technological change and strategic challenges in order to maintain US defence capabilities in a changing world. They provide convincing evidence that the professional military officers who bore the responsibility for maintaining US air supremacy were no less than competent and occasionally inspired. For decades air warriors were compelled to keep up with (and sometimes stay a credible step or two ahead of) novel technologies and tactics. Among the innovative bits of weaponry which they have accommodated are the medium altitude, unmanned aerial vehicles known as "Predators" and the eerie-looking "Stealth" bombers. Among the tactics are the potential deployment of light, portable nuclear weapons and the multi-billion dollar missile defence systems that are,

even now, reviving the dreams of former President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative and, apparently, stimulating similar fantasies in Russia and China. In addition to managing ever more complex technology, the knights of the stratosphere have been required to prepare for every operational contingency from "agile combat support competencies" to space-based surveillance operations. The deployment of the materiel and personnel needed to bomb Baghdad or Tehran, enforce "no-Fly" zones and monitor the possibility that rogue states might chuck a missile in the direction of Tokyo or Tacoma obliges career professionals to do more than develop machinery and to recruit, train and assign warriors to perform critical duties. In these and other matters, it was well understood that complacency and inertia were unacceptable. There needed to be a plan.

Barzelay and Campbell take us on a fascinating tour through the vicissitudes of government-military relations that should engage anyone interested in exploring the premises, promises and pitfalls of strategic planning, not just in the military but in any large corporate entity. The principles appropriate to the military and to health care, to killing and to curing, are disarmingly similar.

In their case study, Barzelay and Campbell stress the role of individual leaders, though not to the exclusion of systemic or environmental factors. Their discussions of "change champions" within the Air Force bureaucracy and the inventive strategy of "guided incrementalism" between the Air Force and other state agencies contain lessons that, as Donald F. Kettl of the University of Wisconsin put it, are useful "for anyone interested in how government can shape the future, instead of the other way around."

The principal protagonists in the book assume the burden of planning for geopolitical problems decades hence. This is no small task, given the hurly-burly of current global events. This is no stage for an atmospheric re-make of "HMS Pinafore." These people need not only a plan, but also a plan for planning.

The lead role is taken by General Ronald Fogelman. Appointed by President Clinton in 1994, Gen. Fogelman was Air Force chief of staff until 1997. Under his leadership, the Air Force did its best to recover from a period of downsizing in which its funding dropped by 34%, its active personnel by 27% and its base installations by 24%. Soon after taking charge, however, this highly qualified and well respected leader began to initiate an ambitious project in which his strategic visioning dramatically expanded the time frame of planners to the point where anticipated needs were mapped out as many as twenty-five or thirty years in advance. Under his watch, planning was given an effective voice in determining strategy. Expertise was rewarded in a most satisfying way; it was respected and it made a difference. The Air Force was in flight.

The scope of his lofty aims might have been daunting to lesser men, but Gen. Fogelman would not be denied. He was a very right man in a very right place at a very right time with, of course, the very right stuff. The institutional circumstances in which he found himself were unusually conducive to success. Among other things, the earlier hiving off of unnecessary upper hierarchical strata gave him freedom to manoeuvre. As Barzelay and Campbell relate, "if organizations have relatively few layers of political appointees

between the department or agency head and the top permanent officials, they seem more likely to engage in creative efforts to revamp themselves." This was the case, and it is a pertinent insight for people concerned with innovation in a broad range of public policy fields.

Also of interest is the degree of collegiality that Fogelman encouraged. He believed that winning consensus among the organization's collective operational administration would, itself, "increase the likelihood the Air Force leadership would operate from a shared vision when requesting the resources needed for modernization." He was largely correct. Collegiality, of course, was carefully managed.

Under Fogelman's sure hand, visions did not become hallucinations. He identified and self-consciously followed five basic components of "strategic visioning":

- carefully organizing participation in the process, including assuring a collective buy-in and identifying a culminating event;
- making sense of information through specific research and analysis projects;
- conceiving strategic intent and "backcasting";
- achieving organizational consensus;
- declaring strategic intent.

Perhaps the most captivating notion is "backcasting." Instead of assuming that current organizations and activities will continue along established paths and that planning would best be done by "forecasting" or projecting existing trends into the future, Fogelman started by identifying the specifications of a preferred goal and planning backwards from the future to ensure that the goal was attained. This did not mean jettisoning the past. "Conceptualizing strategic intent," say the authors, "involved reformulating existing beliefs, rather than developing a completely new body of thinking." Continuity and innovation were partners. Significantly, it also did not mean being a slave to tradition, or to obsolescence.

In order to succeed in a genuine reinvention of the Air Force, solidarity also needed to be created and maintained, in part by reassuring timid followers. A minimum level of comfort was provided by Fogelman's personal style and method. He refrained from "prophetic intervention." He was neither fanciful nor utopian; he simply did his best to make the best possible guess about what US defence would require and to make certain that, when the time came, it would be prepared. This is the stuff of organizational courage; it cannot be successful without support, and Fogelman won it. He "lured" his colleagues into his own frame of mind and proceeded steadfastly but prudently. He was flexible and wilfully opportunistic. He emphasized "modulation" of intensity, knowing that some priorities might have to be delayed until the opportunity for action arose, while other unanticipated chances to make advances could be exploited even if the gains were out of the preferred sequence. Mostly, however, he allowed his staff "to grasp for themselves the gap between the desired future capabilities and requirements and the trajectory of the status quo with only incremental changes in budget commitments and technology." His aim was not an instantaneous "extreme makeover"; it was more

profound – an internal cultural revolution leading to total "transformation of [the] organization's formalized strategic intent."

Unfortunately for Fogelman, unrelated conflicts with the Clinton administration led to his early resignation; however, his replacement, Gen. Michael Ryan, was a man of his own choosing. Though less personally committed to Fogelman's vision, Ryan had little choice but to move ahead. Fogelman had put together a "vision statement" entitled *Global Engagement* which can be set apart from many such documents in that it was not merely an organizational cosmetic or an exercise in vacuous motivationalism. It had actual consequences. It articulated "core competencies" which quickly became the focus for "constituencies that did not shrink from reminding stakeholders of the investments necessary to bring critical elements of that document to fruition." In fact, we are informed, in the comparatively short term of his tenure, Fogelman set in place circumstances that ensured that "the Air Force could not back away from the vision without prompting a backlash, especially in the space community," which had been of special interest to Fogelman (and which was in need of support itself).

The next few years witnessed inconsistency in the pursuit of Fogelman's dream of an enhanced Air Force with not only global reach through conventional technology but also amplified space-based capabilities to coordinate and impose US military hegemony. Some problems can be attributed to Ryan's more cautious approach and some to inter-service jealousies. In addition, despite "strong signals" from the Bush administration that financial resources would be provided to complete the transformation from ideal to reality, the Air Force was disappointed by the actual funding it received. This disappointment was sharpened by high expectations that a Republican administration would be fiscally friendly to technologically driven national defence. Disappointments aside, Barzelay and Campbell tell an irresistible tale of the ways in which audacious administrative entrepreneurship can lead to at least modestly revitalized governance.

Whether current adventurism will decline and a new stage of sound international diplomacy will replace the current turmoil is unknown. If a new equilibrium of sorts is restored, then, and only then, it may be possible to observe the kind of organizational makeover that facilitates realistic prognoses and practical planning. Whether a restored American Empire is possible is an open question; but, if it is, *Planning for the Future* will be a helpful guide to anyone wishing to see it preserved, at least for a little while.