

Section Two

THE COMMON DEFENSE

While the lives of Americans are affected in noteworthy ways, for better or worse, by each part of the executive branch, the inherent importance of national defense and foreign affairs makes the Departments of Defense and State first among equals. Originating in the George Washington Administration, the War Department (as it was then known) was headed by Henry Knox, America’s chief artillery officer in the Revolutionary War; Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, was the first Secretary of State. Despite such long and storied histories, neither department is currently living up to its standards, and the success of the next presidency will be determined in part by whether they can be significantly improved in short order.

“Ever since our Founding,” former acting secretary of defense Christopher Miller writes in Chapter 4, “Americans have understood that the surest way to avoid war is to be prepared for it in peace.” Yet the Department of Defense “is a deeply troubled institution.” It has emphasized leftist politics over military readiness, “Recruiting was the worst in 2022 that it has been in two generations,” and “the Biden Administration’s profoundly unserious equity agenda and vaccine mandates have taken a serious toll.” Additionally, Miller writes that “the atrophy of our defense industrial base, the impact of sequestration, and effective disarmament by many U.S. allies have exacted a high toll on America’s military.” Moreover, our military has adopted a risk-averse culture—think of masked soldiers, sailors, and airmen—rather than instilling and rewarding courage in thought and action.

The good news is that most enlisted personnel, and most officers, especially below the rank of general or admiral, continue to be patriotic defenders of liberty.

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But this is now Barack Obama’s general officer corps. That is why Russ Vought argues in Chapter 2 that the National Security Council “should rigorously review all general and flag officer promotions to prioritize the core roles and responsibilities of the military over social engineering and non-defense related matters, including climate change, critical race theory, manufactured extremism, and other polarizing policies that weaken our armed forces and discourage our nation’s finest men and women from enlisting.” Ensuring that many of America’s best and brightest continue to choose military service is essential.

“By far the most significant danger” to America from abroad, Miller writes, “is China.” That communist regime “is undertaking a historic military buildup,” which “could result in a nuclear force that matches or exceeds America’s own nuclear arsenal.” Resisting Chinese expansionist aims “requires a denial defense” whereby we make “the subordination of Taiwan or other U.S. allies in Asia prohibitively difficult.” However, Miller adds that “[c]ritically, the United States must be able to do this at a level of cost and risk that Americans are willing to bear.”

The best gauge of such willingness is congressional approval. Accordingly, we must rediscover and adhere to the Founders’ wise division of war powers, whereby Congress, the most representative and deliberative branch, decides whether to go to war; and the executive, the most energetic and decisive branch, decides how to carry it out once begun. As the past 75 years have repeatedly demonstrated in different ways—from Korea, to Vietnam, to Iraq, to Afghanistan—we depart from our constitutional design at our peril.

Miller writes that we “must treat missile defense as a top priority,” ensure that more of our weapons are made in America, reform the budgeting process, and sustain “an efficient and effective counterterrorism enterprise.” Across all of our efforts, we must keep in mind that part of peace through strength is knowing when to fight. As George Washington warned nearly two centuries ago, we must continue to be on guard against being drawn into conflicts that do not justify great loss of American treasure or significant shedding of American blood. At the same time, we must be prepared to defend our interests and meet challenges where and when they arise.

An effective diplomatic corps is central to defending our interests and influencing world events. Whereas most military personnel have had leftist priorities imposed from above, the problem at State comes largely from within. Former State Department director of policy planning Kiron Skinner writes in Chapter 6, “[L]arge swaths of the State Department’s workforce are left-wing and predisposed to disagree with a conservative President’s policy agenda and vision.” She adds that the department possesses a “belief that it is an independent institution that knows what is best for the United States, sets its own foreign policy, and does not need direction from an elected President”—a view that does not align with the Constitution.

The solution to this problem is strong political leadership. Skinner writes, “The next Administration must take swift and decisive steps to reforge the department into a lean and functional diplomatic machine that serves the President and, thereby, the American people.” Because the Senate has been extraordinarily lax in fulfilling its constitutional obligation to confirm presidential appointees, she recommends putting appointees into acting roles until such time as the Senate confirms them.

Skinner writes that State should also stop skirting the Constitution’s treaty-making requirements and stop enforcing “agreements” as treaties. It should encourage more trade with allies, particularly with Great Britain, and less with adversaries. And it should implement a “sovereign Mexico” policy, as our neighbor “has functionally lost its sovereignty to muscular criminal cartels that effectively run the country.” In Africa, Skinner writes, the U.S. “should focus on core security, economic, and human rights” rather than impose radical abortion and pro-LGBT initiatives. Divisive symbols such as the rainbow flag or the Black Lives Matter flag have no place next to the Stars and Stripes at our embassies.

When it comes to China, Skinner writes that “a policy of ‘compete where we must, but cooperate where we can’...has demonstrably failed.” The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) “aggressive behavior,” she writes, “can only be curbed through external pressure.” Efforts to protect or excuse China must stop. She observes, “[M]any were quick to dismiss even the possibility that COVID escaped from a Chinese research laboratory.” Meanwhile, Skinner writes, “[g]lobal leaders including President Joe Biden...have tried to normalize or even laud Chinese behavior.” She adds, “In some cases, these voices, like global corporate giants BlackRock and Disney”—or the National Basketball Association (NBA)—“directly benefit from doing business with Beijing.”

Former vice president of the U.S. Agency for Global Media Mora Namdar writes in Chapter 8 that we need to have people working for USAGM who actually believe in America, rather than allowing the agencies to function as anti-American, taxpayer-funded entities that parrot our adversaries’ propaganda and talking points. Former acting deputy secretary of homeland security Ken Cuccinelli says in Chapter 5 that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), a creation of the George W. Bush era, should be closed, as it has added needless additional bureaucracy and expense without corresponding benefit. He recommends that it be replaced with a new “stand-alone border and immigration agency at the Cabinet level” and that the remaining parts of DHS be distributed among other departments.

Former chief of staff for the director of National Intelligence Dustin Carmack writes in Chapter 7 that the U.S. Intelligence Community is too inclined to look in the rearview mirror, engage in “groupthink,” and employ an “overly cautious” approach aimed at personal approval rather than at offering the most accurate, unvarnished intelligence for the benefit of the country. And in Chapter 9, former acting deputy administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development Max

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Primorac asserts that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) must be reformed, writing, “The Biden Administration has deformed the agency by treating it as a global platform to pursue overseas a divisive political and cultural agenda that promotes abortion, climate extremism, gender radicalism, and interventions against perceived systematic racism.”

If the recommendations in the following chapters are adopted, what Skinner says about the State Department could be true for other parts of the federal government’s national security and foreign policy apparatus: The next conservative President has the opportunity to restructure the making and execution of U.S. defense and foreign policy and reset the nation’s role in the world. The recommendations outlined in this section provide guidance on how the next President should use the federal government’s vast resources to do just that.