



SPEAKING OUT

AFRICOM & SOUTHCOM: Reliquaria from an Earlier Age

BY DAVID PASSAGE

President Barack Obama faces many unenviable tasks, such as dealing with an imploding national and global economy and a crushing budget deficit. Nothing he can do with respect to the biggest non-entitlement spending — the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — can significantly alter his financial and economic dilemmas.

And no pruning he might do can even begin to provide the resources needed to re-equip our armed forces with the hundreds of billions of dollars of materiel and munitions that have been expended in those current wars. Vehicles of all types are worn out; we are flying the wings off our aircraft and the rotors off our helicopters; and we are using much of our military equipment to within inches of its programmed life. And we have yet to calculate the ultimate costs of restoring the necessary capacity for other contingencies.

It should also be obvious that it would not be sensible for Pres. Obama to deal with this budgetary problem by telling his agency heads: “On the count of three, everyone take a deep breath and tighten your belt one notch.” Instead, the new administration needs to seriously question the merits of axing whole programs — not merely shrinking each of them by 10 percent.

With respect to the Department of Defense, one of our biggest-ticket items, Pres. Obama could easily achieve

Eliminating the Africa and Southern Commands would be a smart move, both for strategic and budgetary reasons.



significant savings by taking a hard look at restructuring our present geographic military command structure, with the explicit purpose of eliminating two major components: the U.S. Southern Command (responsible for Latin America and the Caribbean) and the newly established Africa Command.

The point of departure should not be a review of whether these two commands can be justified — for that simply invites proponents to make the best case for keeping them. Rather, the question should be how to handle residual functions the U.S. might wish to retain (and there shouldn't be many) within a realigned geographic command structure that would consist of the European Command, Pacific Command, Central Command and a new Western Hemisphere Command. This would combine NORTHCOM's defense of the homeland with responsibility for limited military training, security cooperation and humanitarian assistance missions transferred to it

from the former SOUTHCOM.

Similarly, our military training and humanitarian assistance programs in Africa could revert to subcommands within EUCOM and CENTCOM, where they have historically been situated — or be dealt with by a subcommand of WESTCOM. After all, if the U.S. Central Command (focused on the Middle East) can operate from MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., there is no reason African security assistance functions can't be dealt with from the States as well.

EUCOM, PACOM and CENTCOM have clear, well-defined and unquestioned warfighting missions, as well as robust force structures to support them. AFRICOM and SOUTHCOM do not and should not.

Competing Rationales

Our newest geographic command, the Africa Command, assumed its responsibilities on Oct. 1, 2008. (Anyone interested in a detailed account of its establishment should read Ambassador Robert Gribbin's excellent article in the May 2008 *FSJ*: “Implementing AFRICOM: Tread Carefully.”)

The new command was created partly because former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wanted to refocus EUCOM exclusively on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the countries that emerged from the wreckage of the Warsaw Pact. The



incoming national security adviser, retired General James Jones, the commander of EUCOM at the time, supported the move. Proponents also pointed out that the new command would be free to concentrate its efforts on assisting African governments strengthen civilian control over their armed forces.

An unarticulated further reason the military supported it was the creation of a new four-star billet with all the infrastructure that would require.

A second pressure for the creation of AFRICOM, which I remember well from my service in the Africa Bureau at State and as senior director for Africa on the NSC staff under President George H.W. Bush, was resentment within the Congressional Black Caucus that the U.S. “doesn’t care enough about Africa” to give it what every other region of the world has: a dedicated military command.

Finally, a third impetus was the clearly decreasing ability of African governments to maintain law and order within their own borders, leading to growing anarchy and failed states, which could ultimately threaten U.S. vital national interests and those of its friends and allies. Problems in the Niger River delta, Darfur, the Horn of Africa, Central Africa and elsewhere fueled a growing consensus that Washington needs to do more to strengthen African governance and development — and may ultimately have to use military force to protect its national or humanitarian interests on that continent.

Meanwhile, the State Department failed to press Congress to consider better approaches for addressing the continent’s needs — e.g., strengthening the U.S. Agency for International Development and providing it with adequate resources. Even with the huge

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drain on military resources in Iraq and Afghanistan, no one was willing to argue against creating the new command.

Thus, AFRICOM was launched last year despite vociferous objections from many African countries, the much greater costs of using our military personnel for nationbuilding operations, and the obvious political and psychological drawbacks of tasking U.S. uniformed personnel with what should be civilian development activities.

Yes, there are enormous development needs in Africa; and yes, the U.S. has significantly neglected the continent (notwithstanding Assistant Secretary Jendayi Frazer’s statements praising President George W. Bush’s policies toward Africa). It is also true that our military can do almost anything and go almost anywhere. Nonetheless, the real question is whether such tasks should be done by U.S. military forces.

Does Washington really want to project a military face toward a continent that already suffers from a surfeit of them? Do we Americans believe economic development and internal security structures (e.g., civilian and civilian-led police forces) should be built along military lines by armed forces? And is that what we want Africans to think we believe? If so, shame on us! We do not permit our military to train

our own police and law enforcement personnel and do economic development work in the U.S. Why do we believe this should be done by our military in Africa?

Past as Prologue

If one wants to see what AFRICOM could become, one has only to look at what SOUTHCOM has been. Mercifully, a lot of lessons have been drawn from that experience, which, one hopes, is therefore unlikely to be repeated.

During the first four decades of its existence, SOUTHCOM supported our national interest in preventing Soviet-sponsored takeovers in the Western Hemisphere, such as occurred in Eastern Europe following the defeat of Hitler’s Germany. To be sure, the threat was real; we received a serious wake-up call in May 1948 when Soviet-backed insurgents briefly seized control in Colombia. The coup was undone within days, but fueled the conviction that Washington needed to strengthen Latin American militaries. “And the rest is history,” as the saying goes.

Over the next three decades, U.S.-supported military regimes toppled elected civilian governments in virtually every country in Latin America — Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala — excepting only Mexico and Costa Rica.

And although U.S. policy began changing during the 1970s under President Jimmy Carter, our economic development assistance for Latin America actually declined during the 1980s, 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. Instead, our military assistance grew, first under the guise of



countering growing narcotics trafficking from Andean Ridge countries, and then — particularly after the 9/11 attacks — countering terrorism throughout the hemisphere.

In light of this history, here is the crucial question for President Obama's national security team: Is a military response the right way (let alone the best or most cost-efficient one) to counter the twin threats of terrorism and narco-trafficking in Latin America? For that is now the primary rationale for having a four-star military command with Latin America as its sole area of responsibility, notwithstanding laudable efforts by the current SOUTHCOM commander, Admiral James Stavridis, and his predecessor, General Bantz Craddock, to reshape SOUTH-

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COM's mission to include more inter-agency components and participation.

The Development Conundrum

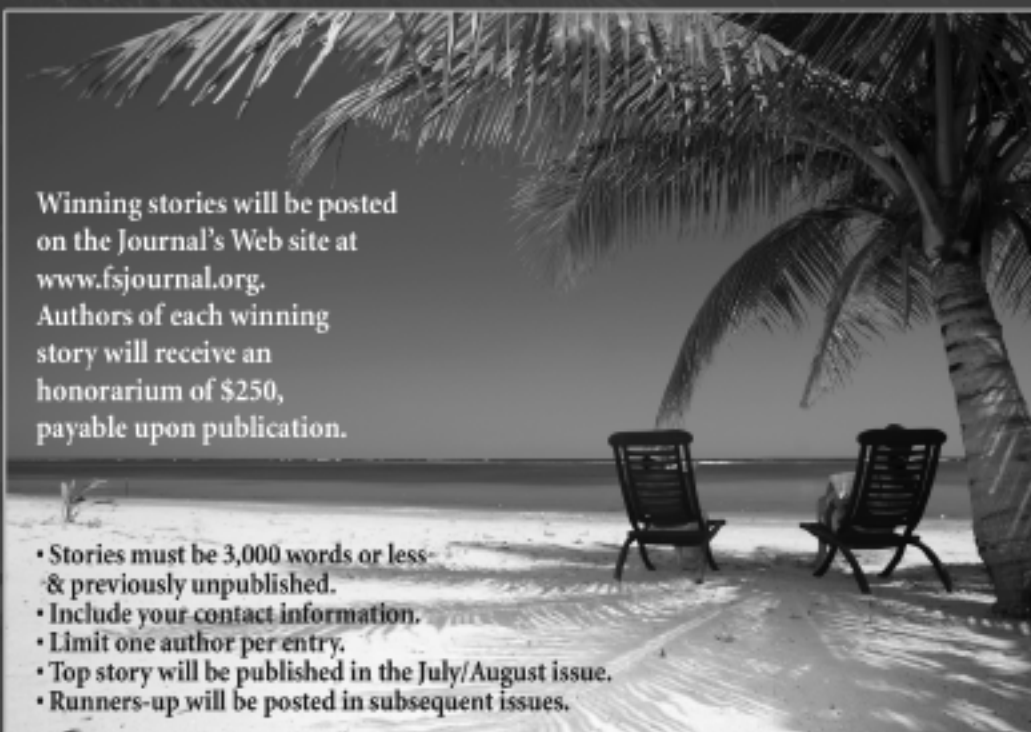
A principal deficiency suffered by virtually all developing countries, but particularly those in Africa and Latin

America, is weak civil law enforcement institutions — both the police and judicial branches. Police forces are, by and large, ill trained, poorly equipped, incompetently led and badly paid. The same can be said for the majority of judges and other law enforcement authorities. This is a prescription for corruption and abuse, so it should come as absolutely no surprise that that has been the result.

Washington's response, regrettably, has been to look for ways our military, acting through SOUTHCOM and now AFRICOM, can ameliorate or rectify these problems. But is that the right, let alone best, means to help our Latin American neighbors or African friends with these structural problems?

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Although our armed forces boast terrific civil affairs personnel, that's not the face we should be seeking to portray to our neighbors, either in this hemisphere or in Africa. Instead, the primary executive agency for this sort of development work should always be USAID (as well as other organizations and agencies with experience in these fields).

President Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates need to wring every conceivable economy out of our defense structure to pay the bills for ongoing operations and re-equip our armed forces. This exigency offers a golden opportunity to review our existing geographic command structure in light of post-Cold War changes. SOUTHCOM is a relic from

an earlier era the U.S. should wish to put behind it, while AFRICOM is the result of a manufactured need and never should have been created at all.

There is simply no need for a standalone four-star command in either Latin America or Africa to achieve U.S. national security goals. Either organization might be justifiable in a world of unconstrained resources, but neither the world they were created for nor the current and foreseeable U.S. resource capacity justifies them now.

Both entities should be eliminated as soon as possible, with their residual training and security assistance functions realigned within other commands or given to a new WESTCOM. ■

Retired Ambassador David Passage spent much of his Foreign Service career in politico-military affairs, including two details to DOD (for the CORDS program during the Vietnam War and as a political adviser to the U.S. Special Operations Command from 1993 to 1996), and has worked with all U.S. regional military commands. He also served in the bureaus of African and Latin American affairs at the State Department, was director for Africa on the National Security Council staff under President George H.W. Bush and was ambassador to Botswana from 1990 to 1993. He now lectures at military schools and training facilities and mentors military exercises. He is also a member of the AFSA Governing Board.



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