

Ready or not: Military preparedness

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Presidential candidate George W. Bush has fueled a debate on U.S. military readiness by charging, among other things, that the military has been neglected and underfunded during the Clinton years. He has specifically charged that two of ten active army divisions are unprepared for combat. This claim appears to be true: two army divisions have not completed combat training. But the reason for this particular failure is noteworthy: it's because many troops in those divisions are deployed in peacekeeping duty in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Such a use of troops raises a larger question that should be part of any debate over military preparedness: What exactly does the U.S. want its forces to be able to do? Long-term peacekeeping work has not been foremost in the minds of military strategists, and it may have nothing to do with the Pentagon's definition of readiness. Nevertheless, such work is likely to be an increasingly important part of military duty. For the past decade or so, the Pentagon has defined military readiness as the ability to fight two medium-sized powers in different parts of the globe (such as Iraq and North Korea) simultaneously. But when U.S. soldiers have entered life-threatening situations in recent years, it has not been in combat roles but as part of policing and peacekeeping missions in such spots as Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Somalia, Haiti and East Timor.

Peacekeeping missions are far from simple. The U.S. soldiers in Kosovo, for example, must be diplomatic, politically shrewd, effective in assisting civilian reconstruction—and still ready to respond to combat situations. Retired army General Wesley K. Clark asks a reasonable question: "Can we expect the military to occupy, patrol, support, sustain and secure—as well as strike and destroy?" It's a tall order, but we suspect that this will indeed be the complex assignment of the modern military.

If so, the need for sophisticated and experienced troops will be more pressing than ever. Surely the young people sent on these difficult tasks deserve the best in training and equipment. And they deserve decent salaries for their families. All of

which means that the military must be adequately funded.

More pressing than any debate over combat readiness is a debate over the U.S.'s readiness to support with its finances and also with its troops the difficult peacekeeping assignments that are likely to arise around the globe. General Clark provides this warning: "Don't think America can lead and influence events around the world if it doesn't pull its weight in the difficult work of peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and participation in other international institutions."