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An Agenda for Mr. Rumsfeld

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The secretary of defense manages the largest, most complex and technologically advanced enterprise in the world. With his experience in public affairs -- including as secretary of defense 25 years ago -- in business and dealing with Congress, Donald Rumsfeld is an excellent choice for this position. He has ideas and vigorous opinions that he will need as part of the strong foreign policy team assembled by President-elect George W. Bush.

Rumsfeld's most important challenge is the modernization of the military. He should accelerate the transition already underway to a smaller, more agile and technologically advanced force. Advances in information technology now make it possible for military commanders to have near real-time information about the size and disposition of enemy forces. When this "battlefield awareness" is coupled with highly accurate munitions and the capability for information warfare, it is possible to imagine a U.S. military that will ensure our superiority in any conceivable conventional military conflict for decades to come.

Many call this transition "a revolution in military affairs." But the term "revolution" incorrectly implies inevitable change rather than the need for disciplined defense planning and management led by the secretary of defense. The secretary must shift the focus of defense acquisition from buying expensive platforms -- advanced combat aircraft, ships and armored fighting vehicles -- to building information networks that collect and distribute timely information to military commanders enabling them to achieve their objectives more rapidly and hence with fewer casualties. Pentagon organization and process also must change to reflect the new focus. This means greater emphasis on command, control and communications and intelligence.

Even with increases in the defense budget, the re-capitalization of our forces using current technology is unaffordable, given other security demands. A military force that takes advantage of the new technology should cost far less, primarily because of a reduction in the number of expensive platforms and in force strength. In this process, Rumsfeld also will need to devise ways to maintain a smaller but still vital and competitive defense industrial base.

Rumsfeld also needs to give vigorous attention to new threats: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,

catastrophic terrorism and the prospects of cyber terrorism against both government and civilian targets. These threats have both domestic and foreign aspects and exist in both peacetime and wartime. Rumsfeld should establish a new program-planning-budgeting category to manage this area, much as the Special Forces program was established in the '60s to deal with the counterinsurgency threat.

The secretary of defense also has a critical role to play in determining whether our relationship with China will become increasingly hostile or peaceful. During Rumsfeld's tenure the United States will almost certainly face one or more crises between China and Taiwan and perhaps a threat from North Korea. Therefore, the secretary should give priority to improved intelligence in the region, theater ballistic and cruise missile defense and, above all, to strengthening defense cooperation with Japan. Transatlantic cooperation is also in need of attention. The secretary of defense should oppose European efforts to form an "independent security identity." Rather, the emphasis should be on strengthening NATO's ability to operate out of area, whether in peacekeeping in the Balkans or in a major conflict in the Middle East.

Rumsfeld certainly will recognize the vital importance of recruiting and retaining outstanding women and men to our military forces. This means more money for military pay increases, quality-of-life programs such as military housing, increased military benefits and high levels of training and readiness activity for military units. The trick will be to see that these personnel expenses are based on analysis and do not grow without bound. Real courage will be needed to accomplish needed base closures.

Rumsfeld faces many other challenges: Iraq, satellite systems, counter-drug programs, preserving our nuclear force posture. But all problems are not equally important. For example, reaching formal arms control agreements is less important than expanding the effort to help Russia control and reduce its considerable stocks of nuclear weapons and material and biological and chemical agents. Similarly, Rumsfeld should not rush for an early decision on national missile defense deployment. The threat is uncertain and the decision may prompt undesirable responses from Russia and China. Moreover, both the Clinton administration's proposed ground-based deployment in Alaska and other possible deployments require more development and testing. Rumsfeld would be wise to take the time to build a bipartisan consensus before moving forward.

The writer is Institute Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He served as undersecretary for acquisition and technology, deputy secretary of defense, and director of central intelligence in the first Clinton administration.

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