

HOW DEFENSE HAS CHANGED SINCE 9/11

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(1) How we fight wars. Since 9/11 [the Pentagon](#) has had to embrace counterinsurgency warfare: the idea that, in order to win any war, US forces cannot simply kill their way to victory – they must rather win hearts and minds of the local population.

But that is expensive, and these sorts of wars tend to last a long time,

Indeed, the most crucial shift in the way the US will conduct wars in the future involves the hubris of leaders who send US soldiers into harm's way. "When you really come down to it, this is a political matter. It's the idea that we're not going to go into a country and fix it. We're going to be much more level-headed in assessing threats in the future," says Wayne White former deputy director of the [US State Department's Middle East Intelligence Office](#). "The idea that we can remake countries – that kind of political hubris has considerably diminished because of the stinging price we've paid."

(2) Military funding. After a traumatic attack on [US](#) soil, lawmakers were quick to authorize nearly unlimited funds for [the Pentagon](#) to rout terrorists who killed thousands of American citizens – and to keep them from ever doing it again.

The ever-increasing defense budget changed the way the Pentagon did business. "In some respects, it lost the ability to prioritize and make the hard choices," says [Todd Harrison](#), a fellow at the [Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments](#) (CSBA). "Instead of having to choose, 'Let's do this,' or 'let's do that,' it was, 'We don't have to choose, so let's do both.'"

Without any pressure to make tough choices, Mr. Harrison says, the Pentagon's budget has grown by roughly three quarters in real terms since 1991. Yet even with a vast budget, the Pentagon was initially slow to get US troops the equipment they needed to fight wars.

Today, however, with the enormous pressure to lower the budget amid the nation's economic crisis – which, some note, has been made worse by the expensive wars America has waged during the past decade – the Pentagon is faced with some tough choices about how it will spend its money in the future.

The challenge, [US military](#) officials warn, is to make smart rather than easy cuts. "Now we're quickly coming back to an era where you have to make the hard choices," Harrison says, "about what we can do, or where we'll have to accept risk."

(3) Women in the military. [America's](#) post-9/11 wars have been unique in that there is no clear front line of fighting.

"In the past, you could say what was the front line and what wasn't," says [Margaret Harrell](#), senior fellow at the [Center for a New American Security](#). "And distance from the front meant relative safety."

So female US troops, who were barred from direct combat occupations, were put in places that "were supposed to be safe" as nurses and supply officers. It wasn't long, however, before female soldiers were "the ones driving the convoys that were getting ambushed."

Commanders now say women are performing as well as their male peers, and that the services couldn't proceed without women doing those jobs," Harrell says.

As a result, a [Defense Department](#) commission recently recommended that all gender-based restrictions for women be removed. "That's a big leap," Harrell adds.

How quickly such restrictions could be lifted remains to be seen, but a number of senior military officials have said they support a reexamination of women's role in combat. Harrell says she can imagine a time in the near future in which [the Pentagon](#) will fill field specialties based on need, rather than the gender of who fills them.

(4) Special Ops. Early in the [Afghanistan](#) war, then-[Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld](#) praised [US Special Operations](#) Forces for the pivotal role they played in routing the [Taliban](#). Later, as the Taliban returned to Afghanistan and the [US military](#) became mired in a protracted counterinsurgency fight, senior [US](#) officials once again turned to special operators, leading to the traditionally hush-hush force's role in killing [Al Qaeda](#) mastermind [Osama bin Laden](#).

Today, they have become premier irregular warfighters in their own right. As a result, they are less focused on partnering with foreign forces and stabilizing those countries from within, "leaving a lot of that to the regular old military," says Mr. Frier of the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#).

The result: "It has really freed up space for special operators to focus on this 'direct action mission' – or targeted strikes on high-value insurgents. "This has always been part of their repertoire, but until 9/11 it was more discreet," Freier adds. "It was not the normal routine of the Special Forces." In the decade of fighting America's current wars, Special Forces have become "these fine tuned instruments," he adds.

(5) Change in leadership roles and views of veterans. As the insurgency raged in [Iraq](#) and began worsening in [Afghanistan](#), the [US military](#) increasingly turned to its young leaders in the field for ways to turn the tide of war.

Young commanders at small outposts were coming up with their own solutions. "War was no longer about overwhelming firepower. It was about working with local populations, and that presented amazing challenges that really required a lot of improvisation," says [Jeffrey Dressler](#), an analyst at the Institute for the Study of War.

It also created a generation of officers more accustomed to decentralization than ever before. "Basically, what you're telling these lieutenants is that in the absence of orders, figure out what the orders should have been and execute them," says Mr. Dressler.

It was an approach that over the decade changed the culture of the military. The post-9/11 period has also made Pentagon officials acutely aware of the need to dramatically improve the treatment of those in its care

For now, the military is increasingly focused on how to continue to challenge its current crop of warfighters after the wars end, says Freier of the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#).

"It's going to be crucially important that we continue to challenge and empower these young leaders. Solutions in Iraq and Afghanistan bubbled up from the bottom," he adds. "That communication from the bottom up proved critical in how we execute contemporary conflicts. We're going to have to continue to capture that lightning in a bottle."