By George Friedman

Stratfor Geopolitical Weekly U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has fired the secretary of the Air Force and the Air Force chief of staff. The official reason given for the firings was the mishandling of nuclear weapons and equipment related to nuclear weapons, which included allowing an aircraft to fly within the United States with six armed nuclear weapons on board and accidentally shipping nuclear triggers to Taiwan. An investigation conducted by a Navy admiral concluded that Air Force expertise in handling nuclear weapons had declined.

Focusing on Present Conflicts

While Gates insisted that this was the immediate reason for the firings, he has sharply criticized the Air Force for failing to reorient itself to the types of conflict in which the United States is currently engaged. Where the Air Force leadership wanted to focus on deploying a new generation of fighter aircraft, Gates wanted them deploying additional unmanned aircraft able to provide reconnaissance and carry out airstrikes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These are not trivial issues, but they are the tip of the iceberg in a much more fundamental strategic debate going on in the U.S. defense community. Gates put the issue succinctly when he recently said that "I have noticed too much of a tendency toward what might be called 'next-war-itis' — the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict." This is what the firings were about.

Naturally, as soon as the firings were announced, there were people who assumed they occurred because these two were unwilling to go along with plans to bomb Iran. At this point, the urban legend of an imminent war with Iran has permeated the culture. But the Air Force is the one place where calls for an air attack would find little resistance, particularly at the top, because it would give the Air Force the kind of mission it really knows how to do and is good at. The whole issue in these firings is whether what the Air Force is good at is what the United States needs.

There is a neat alignment of the issues involved in the firings. Nuclear arms were the quintessential weapons of the Cold War, the last generation. Predators and similar unmanned aircraft are part of this generation's warfare. The Air Force sees F-22s and other conventional technology as the key weapons of the next generation. The Air Force leadership, facing decades-long timelines in fielding new weapons systems, feels it must focus on the next war now. Gates, responsible for fighting this generation's war, sees the Air Force as neglecting current requirements. He also views it as essentially having lost interest and expertise in the last generation's weapons, which are still important — not to mention extremely dangerous.

Fighting the Last War

The classic charge against generals is that they always want to fight the last war again. In

charging the Air Force with wanting to fight the next war now, Gates is saying the Air Force has replaced the old problem with a new one. The Air Force's view of the situation is that if all resources are poured into fighting this war, the United States will emerge from it unprepared to fight the next war. Underneath this discussion of past and future wars is a more important and defining set of questions. First, can the United States afford to fight this war while simultaneously preparing for the next one? Second, what will the next war look like; will it be different from this one?

There is a school of thought in the military that argues that we have now entered the fourth generation of warfare. The first generation of war, according to this theory, involved columns and lines of troops firing muzzle-loaded weapons in volleys. The second generation consisted of warfare involving indirect fire (artillery) and massed movement, as seen in World War I. Third-generation warfare comprised mobile warfare, focused on outmaneuvering the enemy, penetrating enemy lines and encircling them, as was done with armor during World War II. The first three generations of warfare involved large numbers of troops, equipment and logistics. Large territorial organizations — namely, nation-states — were required to carry them out.

Fourth-generation warfare is warfare carried out by nonstate actors using small, decentralized units and individuals to strike at enemy forces and, more important, create political support among the population. The classic example of fourth-generation warfare would be the intifadas carried out by Palestinians against Israel. They involved everything from rioters throwing rocks to kidnappings to suicide bombings. The Palestinians could not defeat the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), a classic third-generation force, in any conventional sense — but neither could the IDF vanquish the intifadas, since the battlefield was the Palestinians themselves. So long as the Palestinians were prepared to support their fourth-generation warriors, they could extract an ongoing price against Israeli civilians and soldiers. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict thus became one of morale rather than materiel. This was the model, of course, the United States encountered in Iraq.

Fourth-generation warfare has always existed. Imperial Britain faced it in Afghanistan. The United States faced it at the turn of the last century in the Philippines. King David waged fourth-generation warfare in Galilee. It has been a constant mode of warfare. The theorists of fourth-generational warfare are not arguing that the United States will face this type of war along with others, but that going forward, this type of warfare will dominate — that the wars of the future will be fourth-generation wars.

Nation-States and Fourth-Generation Warfare

Implicit in this argument is the view that the nation-state, which has dominated warfare since the invention of firearms, is no longer the primary agent of wars. Each of the previous three generations of warfare required manpower and resources on a very large scale that only a nation-state could provide. Fidel Castro in the Cuban mountains, for example, could not field an armored division, an infantry brigade or a rifle regiment; it took a nation to fight the first three generations of warfare.

The argument now is that nations are not the agents of wars but its victims. Wars will not be

fought between nations, but between nations and subnational groups that are decentralized, sparse, dispersed and primarily conducting war to attack their target's morale. The very size of the forces dispersed by a nation-state makes them vulnerable to subnational groups by providing a target-rich environment. Being sparse and politically capable, the insurgent groups blend into the population and are difficult to ferret out and defeat.

In such a war, the nation-state's primary mission is to identify the enemy, separate him from the population and destroy him. It is critical to be surgical in attacking the enemy, since the enemy wins whenever an attack by the nation-state hits the noncombatant population, even if its own forces are destroyed — this is political warfare. Therefore, the key to success — if success is possible — is intelligence. It is necessary to know the enemy's whereabouts, and strike him when he is not near the noncombatant population.

The Air Force and UAVs

In fourth-generation warfare, therefore, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are one of the keys to defeating the substate actor. They gather intelligence, wait until the target is not surrounded by noncombatants and strike suddenly and without warning. It is the quintessential warfare for a technologically advanced nation fighting a subnational insurgent group embedded in the population. It is not surprising that Gates, charged with prosecuting a fourth-generation war, is furious at the Air Force for focusing on fighter planes when what it needs are more and better UAVs.

The Air Force, which was built around the concept of air superiority and strategic bombing, has a visceral objection to unmanned aircraft. From its inception, the Air Force (and the Army Air Corps before it) argued that modern warfare would be fought between nation-states, and that the defining weapon in this kind of war would be the manned bomber attacking targets with precision. When it became apparent that the manned bomber was highly vulnerable to enemy fighters and anti-aircraft systems, the doctrine was modified with the argument that the Air Force's task was to establish air superiority using fighter aircraft to sweep the skies of the enemy and strike aircraft to take out anti-aircraft systems — clearing the way for bombers or, later, the attack aircraft.

The response to the Air Force position is that the United States is no longer fighting the first three types of war, and that the only wars the United States will fight now will be fourth-generation wars where command of the air is both a given and irrelevant. The Air Force's mission would thus be obsolete. Only nation-states have the resources to resist U.S. airpower, and the United States isn't going to be fighting one of them again.

This should be the key point of contention for the Air Force, which should argue that there is no such thing as fourth-generation warfare. There have always been guerrillas, assassins and other forms of politico-military operatives. With the invention of explosives, they have been able to kill more people than before, but there is nothing new in this. What is called fourth-generation warfare is simply a type of war faced by everyone from Alexander to Hitler. It is just resistance. This has not superseded third-generation warfare; it merely happens to be the type of warfare the United States has faced recently.

Wars between nation-states, such as World War I and World War II, are rare in the sense that the United States fought many more wars like the Huk rising in the Philippines or the Vietnam War in its guerrilla phase than it did world wars. Nevertheless, it was the two world wars that determined the future of the world and threatened fundamental U.S. interests. The United States can lose a dozen Vietnams or Iraqs and not have its interests harmed. But losing a war with a nation-state could be catastrophic.

The Next War vs. the War That Matters

The response to Gates, therefore, is that the Air Force is not preparing for the next war. It is preparing for the war that really matters rather than focusing on an insurgency that ultimately cannot threaten fundamental U.S. interests. Gates, of course, would answer that the Air Force is cavalier with the lives of troops who are fighting the current war as it prepares to fight some notional war. The Air Force would counter that the notional war it is preparing to fight could decide the survival of the United States, while the war being fought by Gates won't. At this point, the argument would deadlock, and the president and Congress would decide where to place their bets.

But the argument is not quite over at this point. The Air Force's point about preparing for the decisive wars is, in our mind, well-taken. It is hard for us to accept the idea that the nation-state is helpless in front of determined subnational groups. More important, it is hard for us to accept the idea that international warfare is at an end. There have been long periods in the past of relative tranquility between nation-states — such as, for example, the period between the fall of Napoleon and World War I. Wars between nations were sparse, and the European powers focused on fourth-generational resistance in their colonies. But when war came in 1914, it came with a vengeance.

Our question regards the weapons the Air Force wants to procure. It wants to build the F-22 fighter at enormous cost, which is designed to penetrate enemy airspace, defeat enemy fighter aircraft and deliver ordnance with precision to a particular point on the map. Why would one use a manned aircraft for that mission? The evolution of cruise missiles with greater range and speed permits the delivery of the same ordnance to the same target without having a pilot in the cockpit. Indeed, cruise missiles can engage in evasive maneuvers at g-forces that would kill a pilot. And cruise missiles exist that could serve as unmanned aircraft, flying to the target, releasing submunitions and returning home. The combination of space-based reconnaissance and the unmanned cruise missile — in particular, next-generation systems able to move at hypersonic speeds (in excess of five times the speed of sound) — would appear a much more efficient and effective solution to the problem of the next generation of warfare.

We could argue that both Gates and the Air Force are missing the point. Gates is right that the Air Force should focus on unmanned aircraft; technology has simply moved beyond the piloted aircraft as a model. But this does not mean the Air Force should not be preparing for the next war. Just as the military should have been preparing for the U.S.-jihadist war while also waging the Cold War, so too, the military should be preparing for the next conflict while fighting this war. For a country that spends as much time in wars as the United States (about 17 percent of the 20th century in major wars, almost all of the 21st century), Gates' wish to focus so narrowly

on this war seems reckless.

At the same time, building a new and fiendishly expensive version of the last generation's weapons does not necessarily constitute preparing for the next war. The Air Force was built around the piloted combat aircraft. The Navy was built around sailing ships. Those who flew and those who sailed were necessary and courageous. But sailing ships don't fit into the modern fleet, and it is not clear to us that manned aircraft will fit into high-intensity peer conflict in the future.

We do not agree that preparing for the next war is pathological. We should always be fighting this war and preparing for the next. But we don't believe the Air Force is preparing for the next war. There will be wars between nations, fought with all the chips on the table. Gates is right that the Air Force should focus on unmanned aircraft. But not because of this war alone.