

The men planning America's next air war

[Eric Margolis](#)

An invitation to visit "Checkmate", the US air force's most important and secretive strategic planning group, was an offer that, as a veteran military analyst, I could not refuse. A few weeks earlier, I had written that the air force was the supreme instrument of America's global power, likening it to the 19th-century Royal Navy. Were it not for the USAF's 24-hour close air support, I said, US and British ground forces in Iraq and Afghanistan would be unable to defend their long, vulnerable supply lines, and might even face defeats like those suffered by imperial Britain at Kut and in the Afghan wars.

My column ricocheted around the Pentagon's top brass and received a positive response from General Michael Moseley, the air force chief of staff. I was invited to the Pentagon to brief Checkmate's senior officers on strategic developments in my speciality areas, the Middle East and South Asia. Soon after, I was in the Pentagon's 17.1-mile maze of corridors amid 23,000 military and civilian personnel. The Checkmate group planned the devastating 1991 air force attack on Iraq, and the 2003 strike aimed at decapitating Iraq's leadership. Its austere, high security offices are deep in the Pentagon's prestigious inner rings, heavily shielded against electronic penetration. As I walked through each new section of Checkmate's headquarters, a major preceded me, warning fellow officers to cover secret documents on their desks, and ensuring I did not stray into forbidden areas. I wryly recalled that security had not been this tight when I was the first western journalist invited into the Lubyanka, the KGB's headquarters. Checkmate's staff work close to the Pentagon's Mount Olympus, the offices of the joint chiefs of staff. Brigadier General Lawrence Stutzriem, Checkmate's brainy commander, reports directly to Moseley, who advises the president. In the Pentagon, reporting line can be more important than rank. Unlike other military bureaucracies, Checkmate has the ear of the gods of war. Its 20-30 young, high-energy officers have advanced academic and military degrees and are on the fast track to the top of America's most forward-thinking, smartest service.

While the army and navy plan to re-fight America's last wars, Checkmate is busy planning the next ones. Checkmate's mission is to "think out of the box", develop new, often unorthodox ideas, outflank bureaucracy and ensure they remain "air warriors". Checkmate officers were eager to tell me about the fast-advancing decrepitude of their air fleet, whose average age is nearing 25 years. The air force has been in almost non-stop combat for 17 years. Many aircraft, such as the B-52 heavy bombers, America's version of the Royal Navy's Dreadnoughts, and tanker aircraft, are older than the pilots flying them.

I asked when the Bush administration's widely expected air war against Iran would begin. This was not a subject my hosts cared to discuss. Smiles vanished. Dr Lani Kass, Checkmate's formidable senior civilian official, a former Israeli military officer who had somehow morphed into a senior Pentagon advisor, dismissed my question, insisting no decision to attack Iran had been made. She called a possible air war "unlikely". But I was ready to bet plans to blitz Iran were being drawn up in an adjoining office. One could feel a buzz of excitement among Checkmate's hard-eyed officers who wore combat flight suits and tensed up every time I mentioned Iran. Pentagon sources say the air force has selected 3,000-4,000 targets in Iran, and that some US and British special forces are already operating there. However, Washington sources also report strong opposition to war against Iran among the Pentagon's brass, and high-ranking officials in the CIA, Treasury, and state department. They view war with Iran as unpredictable, unwise and dangerous at a time when US ground and air forces are stretched to breaking point in Iraq and Afghanistan. "We can defeat Iran," insisted Dr Kass, "but are Americans willing to pay the price?"

So far, apparently not. Congress has not been renewing the air force's fleet and will balk at the cost of a new war. Ironically, the air force is victim of its own success. The last time US ground forces came under enemy air attack was in 1953 during the Korean war. America's air force fights and operates so efficiently the public and congress do not understand the enormous efforts and cost of keeping American domination of most of the world's skies, space and cyberspace. Today, the air force has no real enemies left because it shot them all down. If the balloon goes up, Checkmate are likely to target the initial waves of devastating strikes against either Iran, or, as I was told, "the next enemy of America that sticks up its head".

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