

IN CELEBRATION OF

The Mind & Ideas of
Shawn Brimley

JUNE 27, 1977–JANUARY 9, 2018



About this volume

A German word meaning “celebratory writing,” a festschrift is a unique publication devoted to the lifelong ideas and influences of an exceptional scholar.

It is with great sadness and humility that the broader national security policy community has collaborated to produce this festschrift in honor of Shawn Brimley. It is our hope that Shawn’s exceptional ideas and influence can be preserved and shared with others.

The Center for a New American Security would like to thank the many contributors for making this possible.

How Shawn Brimley Did It

RICHARD FONTAINE

The loss of Shawn Brimley devastated Washington's national security community. All who knew him saw in Shawn a brilliant defense analyst, a visionary organizational leader, and a pragmatist who got things done. Most understood how much he loved his family, and how devoted he was to his children. And some were aware – perhaps, on occasion, too aware, given his penchant for oversharing – of his fondness for *Star Wars*, '90s music, sci-fi novels, and CrossFit. His life, cut short at 40 years, was fuller than that of many who will live twice as long.

Eloquent tributes to Shawn have come in from many quarters, and from places as disparate as Washington, Toronto, and Sydney. His life has been called extraordinary, Washington termed Shawn Brimley's town, his career referred to as an intellectual ballet. He has been praised at length in the U.S. Senate. Nearly a thousand people have made individual contributions to the educational fund established for Shawn's children, including many who never met him. He was loved by friends and neighbors, supervisors and employees, interns, and the senior-most policymakers. Shawn was my colleague and my friend.

Shawn was successful in the way that most ambitious young people arriving in Washington hope one day to become. He worked at the Pentagon, where he shaped the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, and then at the White House, where he served ably on the National Security Council staff. He was executive vice president at the Center for a New American Security, where he directed our studies program and managed a stable of top-flight, headstrong policy experts. Shawn advised presidential campaigns, published articles on national security policy, appeared on television, and made speeches. Senior government officials sought out his counsel. All this, and he had spent just 15 years in this field.

In this bitterest of times, in a town riven by anger and strife, in a field animated by ambition and drive, Shawn seemed to stand apart. His goodness and happiness seemed to come not at the expense of his success but as an inextricable part of it. As we mourn his passing and celebrate his life, it's worth pausing to ask: How did he do it?

First, he charted his own path in Washington. The prototypical route to the corridors of power is through an elite university, multiple internships, a handful of good connections, and a plan for success. Shawn had none of those. Consider, for instance, that he served five years in the army before even graduating from college – the Canadian army! From Toronto to teaching English in Japan and eventually to Washington, Shawn's trajectory contradicted every rising star's hopes of establishing a 10-year career plan and then assiduously climbing the rungs necessary to achieve its ends. He simply identified discrete, fulfilling career experiences and moved from one to another to another. In this alone, Shawn pointed the way to a meaningful working life.

Second, he was humble. Once in Washington, he looked with amusement at the feverishly striving, aggressively networking career aspirants, those ready at a moment's notice to ditch a happy hour with friends or meal at home for a dinner that would continue the workday. Traditional notions of status and exposure meant little to Shawn. He was unpossessed by a drive to get his name "out there" or trade on titles and offices, and

instead threw himself into making ideas and people better. He published good ideas, his own and others, and saw himself succeeding when others did. The director of studies position at CNAS requires brilliance and hard work, accompanied by a willingness to sublimate one's own energies into guiding and improving the work of colleagues. Shawn was a natural at it. He made every piece of writing I showed him better, something experienced by so many people who worked with him. And in a town where self-promotion is so prevalent that the "Washington read" is a real phenomenon, Shawn spent most of his efforts promoting others. Word got around: Brimley will make your stuff great.

Third, he was enthusiastic. Perhaps the most common impression Shawn left on his colleagues and friends was his infectious enthusiasm. It didn't matter whether it was a *Star Wars* movie, a new book on the diffusion of military technology, an upcoming national security strategy document, or a novel project planning tool: Shawn's passion for everything rubbed off on everyone. Sitting with him the day before he died, I listened while Shawn lambasted me for not watching all four Dave Chappelle comedy specials on Netflix. "It's exactly your kind of humor," he said, "and it's unfathomable that you haven't seen them all." (I said I had watched just two.) I left thinking I'd better get on this pronto - maybe even cancel a meeting or two, given the importance of the matter.

This suggests another way Shawn did it: with humor. Shawn was hilarious. His annual appearance as beer-drinking Santa Claus at our staff holiday party has become legendary, but his sense of humor infused the workplace year-round. He knew how to lighten a mood, make people laugh, and diffuse tension. Shawn took his work seriously, but never himself. He did the small things with the same humor and spirit with which he tackled the biggest tasks.

And finally, Shawn did it with passion - or, perhaps more accurately, with love. It was obvious that Shawn loved his family, loved his work and its mission, loved his friends and co-workers, and loved his adopted country. He had a tremendous professional network built not for its own sake, but as a byproduct of the close relationships he made wherever he went. By throwing himself into everything he did - "leaving it all on the field," in his words - Shawn built institutions, influenced national security policy, charted a successful career, and attracted talented people wishing to work with him. He loved life and work and the people around him. And we loved him.

Let's not exaggerate: Shawn Brimley was not perfect. None of us is. He had trouble saying no, including to those who worked for him. His social media habits were apt to get out of hand from time to time. His oversharing could bleed into a downright lack of appropriateness. And about twice each year, Shawn and I would get into big, sharp arguments, usually over some management decision. When that happened, his chin would tighten and he'd dig in, and we'd drive each other crazy. Then it would blow over.

To pretend that Shawn was a saint would not only be wrong, it would miss the point. In truth, everything he accomplished was very human, even as it often embodied the best of human traits. He wasn't perfect, but he was remarkable, and he set standards for which we all can - and we all should - strive. That's why his funeral brought a who's who of the national security community together with family, neighbors, and friends

who couldn't distinguish the National Security Council from Kylo Ren. His Washington career trajectory was atypical, from beginning to end. I wish it could have been far longer, and that he were with us today. But those seeking the path to success, meaning, and fulfillment could do far worse than look to Shawn Brimley as a model. His 40 years on earth taught us all something important about how to work, and how to live.



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*Shawn Brimley's Time at the
Center For Strategic and
International Studies*

DR. AIDAN WINN

Shawn and I were research associates together in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) from 2004 to 2006. It was the first real job that each of us had held in the field and as any young think tank researchers should be, we were both brimming with idealism, ambition, and naiveté. But what became clear to me almost immediately was that Shawn possessed a unique mix of intellectual curiosity, analytical discipline, and humility that drew others to him and helped to shape his path of extraordinary professional achievement. He took his role at CSIS seriously. In part, no doubt, because he directly supported the work of Michèle Flournoy – a leader and defense intellectual whom he greatly admired. He also deeply respected CSIS as an organization and its mission of informing policy decisions through nonpartisan analysis. But in addition to these things, I think he appreciated what a unique and valuable opportunity it was to be working alongside so much expertise so early in his career, and he was determined to make the most of it.

Shawn was a voracious reader and his ever-growing library, back then much of which he squished into our small, shared office, was never for show. He had not only read these volumes – historical to contemporary and everything in between – but he referred to them often. As a consequence, Shawn’s view of current and future strategic challenges was grounded in a firm grasp of history. He often looked to the past for relevant lessons and at the same time as he looked forward to anticipate the possible evolutions of major security challenges. In Shawn’s time at CSIS there were plenty of them to consider. In 2004, the nature and scope of the threats from al Qaeda and its associated Islamic extremist movements were still just beginning to be explored. The nation was deeply divided over the Iraq War and the circumstances surrounding U.S. involvement there. Shawn waded into the uncertainty and polarization that characterized that time, immersed himself in all the relevant literature, media coverage, and policy analysis he could find, and in a remarkably short time developed his own voice and the confidence to share his views widely.

In the early years of the Iraq War, Shawn frequently observed thematic connections between the challenges the United States was facing there and those we had faced 40 years prior in Vietnam. He drew attention to the fact that narratives and analytic framing being used to characterize the consequences of a poor outcome in Iraq closely resembled those that had been used to discuss Vietnam. At one point, he came across an old National Intelligence Estimate describing “Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam.” He was struck that by only crossing out references to “Vietnam” and replacing them with “Iraq” and by making a few other minor tweaks, the memo read almost exactly like a present-day characterization of the situation in Iraq. He felt the parallels were so compelling they deserved the attention of decisionmakers.¹ His keen appreciation for history combined with his understanding of the pressures and constraints facing the policy community enabled him to place timely issues in a broader historical context and to suggest fresh perspectives on heavily debated questions. He was concerned about how the operational networks into and out of Iraq were helping to sustain the conflict there, much the way the Ho Chi Minh Trail had done in Vietnam.² But as he explored these strategic parallels he rejected comparisons that he felt were overly simple or inappropriate and instead drew attention to subtler points that other analysts had overlooked.³

In the fall of 2006, after a steady upswing in violence in Iraq, Thomas Friedman published an op-ed in *The New York Times* characterizing the pattern of insurgent activity as a “jihadist equivalent of the Tet offensive.”⁴ Shawn was intrigued by the historical reference and agreed it had relevance, but he felt that Friedman has missed key points about the bigger picture. Shawn pointed out that contrary to Friedman’s recounting, Tet’s goal had actually not been primarily psychological (while of course its psychological impact proved enormous); rather, it had been designed to inflict maximum damage on the South Vietnamese military and to topple the government in Saigon. Furthermore, Shawn argued, the bigger lesson from Tet was that as a direct consequence, Gen. William Westmoreland was replaced by Gen. Creighton Abrams as commander of U.S. ground forces in Vietnam. This change in leadership helped to shift American strategy toward more effective counterinsurgency policy, which better unified military and civilian operations. Abrams also assigned higher priority to training the South Vietnamese military forces than had been done previously. While the strategic shift came too late in Vietnam, Shawn argued that Iraq could still benefit from an increased focus on advising. This was Shawn’s analytical style. He was eager to apply the lessons of history, but he was precise in his analysis and nuanced in the way he incorporated them. He focused on the most useful and relevant aspects of history to help guide policy and strategy formulation. When it came to the use of historical analogies, he was instinctively aware that a misleading analogy was just as damaging to decisionmaking as a good one was helpful.

Well before Shawn served in government himself, he was concerned with the strategic problems inherent in the national security policy process. His broad-lens approach drew him to these problems. In 2006, Michèle and Shawn spent time considering the problems posed by the absence of an institutionalized process for long-range national security planning. To help illustrate the nature of this issue and in order to propose ideas for dealing with it, they borrowed from a historical model – President Dwight Eisenhower’s Project Solarium.⁵ They recounted the way Eisenhower came to the conclusion that in order to better combat “the tyranny of the inbox” facing National Security Council principals, an institutionalized process of vigorous, balanced debate over long-range planning issues was required. While the specific national security challenges had changed significantly since Eisenhower’s time, Shawn and Michèle argued that this fundamental problem facing decisionmakers had persisted: Decisionmakers were often overwhelmed by pressures to respond to the “urgent,” and this risked crowding out the opportunity to focus on the truly important. As a model for engaging with this problem, they suggested something resembling Eisenhower’s Project Solarium was needed: a forum where alternate viewpoints would be debated and seriously considered in a dispassionate manner and where policy could be forged from a combination of the best features of each, no matter how incompatible they seemed at first glance. It’s natural that Eisenhower’s Project Solarium would have appealed to Shawn. These qualities of open-mindedness, lively debate, and analytical rigor were always central features of his work.

During Shawn’s time at CSIS the dynamics of the conflict in Iraq dominated a great deal of everyone’s attention. But as much as Shawn focused on the internal dynamics of the conflict, he was also interested in its broader and longer-term consequences. We both became interested in the question of how the war in Iraq would be exploited by al Qaeda to further its goal of radicalizing individuals and groups within the global Muslim

diaspora – in particular, populations in the West. When a homegrown cell was disrupted in our shared hometown of Toronto in the summer of 2006, we were both struck by the similarities apparent between that case and the group responsible for the bombing of the London subway a year before that.⁶ We both knew Toronto as an ethnically diverse, tolerant, and politically progressive city, so this revelation was particularly sobering. Shawn often raised questions about how spillover from Iraq’s conflict was likely to destabilize neighboring countries and how the eventual return of foreign fighters to their home countries could threaten other regions, especially Europe.⁷ He was particularly concerned about how the diffusion of operational and technical skills would be aided by these patterns of movement. And many of the concerns he expressed over a decade ago have been borne out in the intervening years.⁸

Shawn valued collaboration with colleagues very highly. This is important to emphasize not only to highlight his social gifts and his willingness to be a “team player,” but rather his genuine belief that the best ideas emerged from cooperative processes, thoughtful conversation, and the leveraging of diverse experiences and perspectives. By no means did he have any shortage of great ideas of his own. But he seemed to appreciate instinctively that most often teamwork simply led to a better product than what emerged from working independently. When he had a great idea for an op-ed, he often approached a colleague to co-author it. And this collaborative spirit was never more apparent than when Shawn championed a center-wide effort at CSIS to reflect on the significance of the five-year anniversary of 9/11. We worked together on this effort, but the idea originated in Shawn’s mind.

Shawn first raised the issue with me in spring 2006. Anticipating the coming anniversary, he was concerned that CSIS mark its significance in a public way. He asked me and others, “What was CSIS going to contribute to this conversation?” At that point, nobody knew. There was no plan. He felt strongly that an organization like CSIS, with its breadth and depth of expertise, was not only uniquely positioned to examine progress and failures in the then so-called war on terror, but that it was incumbent upon us as an organization to do so. He knew that the milestone would be seized upon by members of both parties as a political tool, but CSIS, he felt, should use this opportunity to display its research and analytical capabilities and to thoughtfully inform the debate. He wanted to make sure the milestone was marked with more than just a series of sound bites and that it involved a deeper, more serious examination of important questions, such as whether we were safer as a result of post-9/11 policy changes and what direction our future strategies should take. He felt the anniversary should be forward-looking as well as retrospective and that it offered an important opportunity to discuss necessary strategic shifts and the development of new capabilities.

We began by discussing the idea privately, brainstorming ideas for what we thought this project and event should look like and what its objectives would be. Shawn felt it was essential that in evaluating the progress and setbacks that had occurred since 9/11 that CSIS showcase its ability to work across its own organizational lines and “silos.” The failure of U.S. government agencies to work across their own organizational lines in the lead-up to and in the aftermath of 9/11 had become a central criticism and prominent theme in policy debates. Given this climate, Shawn felt it was important that this event

not be hosted by any single program. After we obtained support from our closest colleagues in the International Security Program, we were instructed to go pitch our idea to John Hamre, the president and CEO of CSIS. I vividly remember the expression on Dr. Hamre's face as we sat down to describe our idea. He seemed to be intrigued, pleased, but also a little bewildered by these two research associates sitting down in his office to share their conviction that CSIS organize a center-wide event of this nature. But he agreed that the idea was worthwhile, and off we went to continue our plans. After several months of planning and collaboration CSIS held a major public event to mark the milestone with a series of panel discussions. CSIS also published a companion report containing contributions from several of CSIS' experts from across different programs.⁹ The report examined ideological dimensions of the struggle against global terrorism, domestic security, intelligence, international cooperation, and alliances as well as an examination of strategy and capabilities. Like many of Shawn's collaborations, the event's success demonstrated a sum greater than its parts. And Shawn's vision and initiative were at the center of it.

By writing, spearheading events, and candidly debating with senior and military fellows, Shawn set an example for other junior staff in those years that was incredibly powerful. Through his work he conveyed a message to others that basically said: "You're here, now what are you going to do with this time?" In many ways it was more authentic and persuasive than formal efforts designed to develop young professionals by senior professionals often are. Shawn's leadership took place at the peer level and it was demonstrated through example. He encouraged other junior staff and interns to engage and be heard, and he did so in a gregarious and optimistic way.

Shawn's success followed a steep trajectory after his time at CSIS. His contributions at the Center for a New American Security and during his years serving in government are captured so well by his other colleagues in this volume. But I am confident that those of us who worked closely with Shawn in his very first professional role in the field of national security were affected in a profound and lasting way by his energy, his intellect, and his drive to contribute. I hope that this collection of essays will help others who did not have the opportunity to work alongside Shawn to be similarly inspired.

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Phased Transitions

THE HONORABLE JAMES N. MILLER

Transition #1. CNAS Early Hires

In late 2006, when I was offered the irresistible opportunity to join the soon-to-be Center for a New American Security as director of studies, I already knew co-founders Kurt Campbell and Michèle Flournoy extremely well. Kurt had been one of my doctoral thesis advisors, and best man in my wedding. Michèle was a great friend and mentor, and had been my boss in the Clinton administration. They were two of the greatest minds and most talented leaders in the national security arena. I admired and trusted them both entirely. (And do still.)

Yet, when Michèle and Kurt raved about this young research fellow Shawn Brimley, whom they had hired ahead of me and all others, I had to wonder: Could someone that young really be that extraordinary – especially in a field where good judgment often comes from many years of hard-won experience?

As CNAS coalesced in early 2007, I got to work closely with Shawn, and to see his brilliant mind and courageous heart at work to help build this emerging institution. I saw his insightfulness and integrity as an initial small group debated the new center’s vision and mission. I saw him argue passionately that despite starting the new think tank almost exclusively with a group of Democrats, we could and must work to establish a truly bipartisan center.

And notwithstanding Shawn’s being a Canadian citizen, and perhaps in part because of his military service, I saw a fiery passion in him for doing what’s right for the United States and for American men and women in uniform.

Within a couple months of CNAS’ origin, the answer to whether Shawn was really that good became clear: Yes. Oh, yes indeed.

Transition #2. The Iraq War “Surge”

As CNAS was being established in late 2006 to early 2007, the nation was deeply divided on the Iraq War. A clear majority of Americans polled believed that the war was going “not well” or “not at all well”; moreover, a majority favored “bring[ing] the troops home as soon as possible.”¹

The bipartisan Iraq Study Group issued its report in December 2006. Its perspective on the situation was clear from the first sentence of the executive report: “The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating.” Its assessment of the prospects was cautious, if not skeptical, as evidenced in the first sentence of the main report: “There is no guarantee for success in Iraq.” The Iraq Study Group’s core recommendation was for the United States to temporarily boost U.S. training of Iraqi forces, but then to drastically reduce the American military footprint and “encourage the Iraqi people to take control of their own destiny.”²

In parallel to the Iraq Study Group’s work, a small cadre of active and retired military officers, with retired Army General Jack Keane at the forefront, was making a very different case to the White House: that the U.S. should double down on its commitment to

Iraq and “surge” U.S. ground forces to regain the initiative. As Keane wrote in a co-authored article near the end of 2006: “The key to the success is to change the military mission – instead of preparing for transition to Iraqi control, that mission should be to bring security to the Iraqi population. Surges aimed at accelerating the training of Iraqi forces [as proposed by the Iraq Study Group] will fail, because rising sectarian violence will destroy Iraq before the new forces can bring it under control.”³

In January 2007, President George W. Bush made his decision, siding clearly with Keane and colleagues in announcing a surge of additional U.S. troops into Iraq. Bush argued that this new approach would succeed where prior attempts had failed, in large measure because U.S. “troops will have a well-defined mission: To help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs.”⁴

Transition #3. The Iraq War Surge Inside CNAS

CNAS was born in the immediate aftermath of Bush’s surge decision. The Iraq issue was front burner – Defense Secretary Robert Gates had quipped in his confirmation hearing in December 2006 that his top three priorities would be Iraq, Iraq, and Iraq. The same was true for the nation as a whole: The Iraq issue was red-hot. In February 2007, 38 percent of those polled by Gallup viewed the Iraq War as the most important issue facing the nation, up from 36 percent in January – and nearly double the salience of the next three issues combined (health care at 8 percent, the economy and dissatisfaction with government each at 7 percent).⁵

In one memorable CNAS staff meeting, in February 2007, all seven members of the early CNAS team got together to discuss what would be the topics for the Center’s “rollout” reports. We all understood that these first half-dozen or so reports, presented publicly at the CNAS rollout event that spring, would offer the world one of the first impressions of the new think tank. Everyone agreed at the outset that any new national security think tank in 2007 absolutely needed to have a major report on the biggest issue facing the nation: the Iraq War.

To this day, I do not recall whether I volunteered or was “volun-told” by Kurt and Michèle that I would be writing this Iraq report. What I do recall is that by that time, after knowing Shawn for only a couple weeks, I desperately wanted (and needed) him as co-author. Indeed, there was no doubt in my mind which one of us was indispensable to success ... Shawn (of course).

Unspoken was that our report on Iraq would be central to defining CNAS as an institution, both internally and externally. No pressure!

There was one little problem: Neither Shawn nor I was expert on the Middle East, let alone Iraq. I knew we would solve this problem by tapping into the entire CNAS team; everyone wanted to work on this problem and particularly with Shawn. Plus, we had access to a lot of additional talent and expertise: the Center’s board of directors (Richard Danzig and Madeleine Albright were especially helpful), the Center’s board of advisors (Chip Gregson and Jim Steinberg were particularly supportive), and an

extensive network of military officers and civilians, including many who had served and/or were serving in Iraq.

And so began the CNAS Iraq surge. This surge brought all CNAS staff into a nearly constant stream of meetings over several months aimed at tapping the full range of views and perspectives on the war, and on the possible ways forward. The weekly staff meetings during this period were especially boisterous. Because everyone wanted to talk (and some even wanted to listen) regarding Iraq, the first few all-hands staff meetings started on this issue ... and two hours later were adjourned without covering any other topics.

Transition #4. From Brimley and Miller to “Goose and Maverick”

A few days after Shawn and I had gotten started on in-depth research and writing, we were sitting in my office, in the midst of an intense conversation about the situation in Anbar province, Iraq, and in particular the implications of the then-ongoing “Sunni Awakening.” We were going back-and-forth rapid fire, riffing off of each other’s ideas. Without warning, Shawn jumped out of his chair and shouted: “This is so awesome! We are going to be great partners on this!” I couldn’t have agreed more, and couldn’t have been more pleased and flattered. But I wondered at what happened next.

Shawn rushed out of my office without another word. I decided to stay sitting at my desk to see what he might do. Maybe our conversation had reminded Shawn of some song, and he would come back into my office in a moment singing and playing guitar. (Shawn’s bursting out of the room would have gone well with Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run,” or perhaps Van Halen’s “Jump!”) Or maybe Shawn had just remembered a phone call he needed to make.

Two minutes later, Shawn burst back into my office. (I remember him sliding in, like Kramer in *Seinfeld*, but perhaps this is an embellishment of my memory.) It was clear he had been at his computer, and then the printer. Aha, I thought: Shawn has printed a map of Anbar province, and now he will show me some epiphany by referring to the map.

What Shawn then shared was not Anbar province, but a printed photo from the 1986 movie *Top Gun*. I looked at the photo, then at Shawn, then back at the photo, and then back again at Shawn. And then came Shawn’s explanation, which he was clearly surprised and disappointed was needed: “Jim, I’m your wingman on this project. So, see, you’re Maverick, and I’m Goose.”

How many people would a) think of a 20-year-old movie in the midst of an intense conversation on the Iraq War; b) act on this inspiration without explanation; and c) while showing this hilarious but inspired leadership, choose to place himself as the “wingman” rather than the lead pilot? I believe exactly one such person has ever walked the face of the earth.

From that point onward, when Shawn and I would get together to work on the Iraq report, he would have an appropriate *Top Gun* quote handy, apparently from memory. I would occasionally do some homework so I could give Shawn a cue. (I had liked the movie, but just didn’t have Shawn’s memory for movies or indeed for anything else.)

As we faced down our third (or perhaps fourth) extension of our self-imposed deadline for finishing the report, I looked through my secret cheat sheet of Top Gun quotes and told Shawn, "I feel the need." Without missing a beat, Shawn jumped up to give me a high-five, shouting out, "The need for speed!"

Transition #5. From a Blank Sheet of Paper to ... One Sheet of Paper

Shawn and I, and the entire team, agreed that we needed to start by defining clearly U.S. interests in Iraq. Everyone involved understood that the answer to this question of U.S. interests would be central to articulating what approach the United States should take in Iraq.

Two U.S. vital interests were self-evident: avoiding al Qaeda safe havens that could threaten the United States, and avoiding a broader war that could destabilize the region.

So, what else if anything should be on the short list? Was oil a vital U.S. interest in Iraq? Was promoting democracy a vital U.S. interest? Was preventing Iran from exerting control of southern Iraq and in Baghdad a vital U.S. interest?

In early March 2007, we held a ridiculous number of intensive all-hands meetings focused on the question of U.S. interests in Iraq. The most hotly debated question was whether, after invading and occupying the country, the United States had a moral obligation to the people of Iraq. Or would it be acceptable to rapidly withdraw as the United States had in Vietnam in 1972, potentially leaving a power vacuum that would likely result in sectarian war and ethnic cleansing that could exceed what had occurred in the Balkans in the 1990s?

There were several fierce advocates of the view that the United States could not walk away from the mess it had created, leaving the people of Iraq to their fates. Shawn was perhaps the fiercest. We agreed that he and Michèle would write a short research note to put the CNAS oar in the tumultuous waters of the ongoing Iraq debate (Michèle had recently traveled to Iraq and had a higher profile than did I). We needed a catchy phrase, which Kurt borrowed from the Asia-Pacific side of his brain. Thus, on March 20, 2007, CNAS put out its first official research note, "Enduring U.S. Interests in Iraq: The Three No's," with U.S. interests articulated as:

- No regional war
- No al Qaeda safe havens
- No genocide

Transition #6. Finding Middle Ground

Even with U.S. interests clearly defined, and all of the incredible CNAS talent at our disposal, Shawn and I faced a daunting hurdle. Washington was saturated with reports and books on the Iraq War: Was there anything original left to say? And if so, given the deep divisions in the country over the war, could we do so in a way that protected U.S. interests – and attracted some measure of bipartisan support?

Polarization over the Iraq War in late 2006 to early 2007 was extraordinary, comparable to if not exceeding that of the late 1960s' debate in the United States over Vietnam. A Gallup poll taken in September 2006 found 68 percent of Republicans had a "very favorable" or "somewhat favorable" view of the war, compared with only 7 percent of Democrats. On the other hand, over 90 percent of Democrats had an unfavorable view of the war, with a stunning 74 percent of those polled having a "very unfavorable" view.⁷ If anything, these views hardened after Bush sidestepped the bipartisan Iraq Study Group's recommendations in favor of a surge focused on protecting the Iraqi population.

We knew that by the time our report was slated to be published, in June 2007, the surge would be well underway. Based on then-ongoing CNAS work on the state of the military, we also knew that the surge was unsustainable: The Army was approaching its breaking point.⁸ Finally, we (and most others) knew that the security situation in Iraq after the surge ended would still be very challenging and would require a significant U.S. presence for any chance to succeed. Thus, it was clear that there must be a transition within 18 months from surge to something else – something other than immediate withdrawal.

It was clear that a sustained surge of advisors was needed after the ongoing surge focused on population protection, and that the Department of Defense was not on a path to providing the needed quality or quantity of advisory capability. This led to two key questions: How to provide such a capability in sufficient capacity, and in a hurry? And, if this war was to end, what needed to happen next?

Shawn and I had uncovered two very different ideas about how advisors could be produced more rapidly, and we asked the proponents, John Nagl (later president of CNAS) and Bob Killebrew (another brilliant retired Army officer), to flesh out their ideas in separate reports.⁹ With their help, along with that of Colin Kahl (who would serve as deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East starting in 2009) we picked through their best ideas for our report.

Transition #7. Toward a Flexible Timeline for Phasing the Withdrawal of U.S. Forces

On the second key question (what next after a surge of advisors?), a shouting match, more than a debate, raged in Washington policy circles: Should the United States set a timeline for withdrawal from Iraq, or (as the military generally prefers) should the U.S. posture be "conditions-based"?

Shawn and I set out to find a third option, between immediate defeat and unending commitment, that could protect U.S. interests and be politically feasible. We kicked around various options, none of which seemed satisfactory. Richard Danzig in particular pushed us to keep pushing and to concoct an approach that included both timeline-based and condition-based elements

The epiphany emerged in the course of debating perhaps the fifth draft (if Shawn were still with us, he might suggest it was actually the 15th, or perhaps 50th). In essence, we proposed what at first blush sounded like a contradiction in terms: a conditions-based timeline. As we wrote in the report:

Setting a timeline is essential to both accelerating the “Baghdad clock” and putting more time on the “Washington clock.” If required by changes in the strategic situation, the timing of phases including final withdrawal could be delayed or accelerated, but there would be strong incentives for both Iraq and the United States to stick by a timeline once announced.¹⁰

We recognized that our proposed timeline might need adjustment. And we recognized that things could go very badly – and so proposed development of a detailed Plan B for falling back to a consolidated U.S. presence, and a worst-case Plan C for a contested withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Transition #8. Into the Obama Administration

The early debates at CNAS over the Iraq War deeply informed Shawn’s and my work and the views that we carried into government less than two years later. As we debated Iraq at CNAS in early 2007, little did we know that around the table sat numerous individuals who would help shape the next administration’s approach to Iraq, including two future under secretaries of defense for policy (Flournoy and Miller); a future assistant secretary of defense responsible for the Middle East, Europe, and Africa (Derek Chollet); and a deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East (Kahl).

Moreover, the entire CNAS team’s work on Iraq and so many other issues helped to forge a community of pragmatic and principled security professionals. In addition to those mentioned above, Shawn and I especially benefited from our CNAS colleagues Nate Fick, Alice Hunt, Christine Parthemore, Eric Pierce, Tammy Schultz, Vikram Singh, Emma Vialpando, and Michael Zubrow. We benefited hugely also from outside experts, including Gary Anderson, Roger Carstens, Chip Gregson, T.X. Hammes, Frank Hoffman, Kathleen Hicks, Bob Killebrew, Clark Murdock, Steve Sklenka, Jim Steinberg, and Christine Wormuth.

Among all of these professionals with whom I had the honor to work in the early days at CNAS, none was more talented and committed than my co-author, Shawn. It was no surprise that Michèle asked him to lead the Obama administration’s Quadrennial Defense Review. (Nor was it a coincidence that the QDR’s number one strategic priority was “Prevail.”) Nor was it a surprise that Shawn went on to have tremendous impact as senior strategist at the National Security Council, and then back as director of studies at CNAS.

Transition #9. Looking Back

In retrospect, writing now more than 10 years after Shawn’s and my “Phased Transition” report, I still believe that our conditions-based timeline – which to a significant degree was followed by the Bush administration as the surge wound down in 2008 and then by the Obama administration – was close to the best possible plan as of mid-2007. As Shawn and I noted then, it was not a great option – but appeared to be better than all other options.

The phases of “Phased Transition” made good sense, particularly the initial move from “surge” to a “sustainable” posture, and then to a “targeted advisory effort.” But we overestimated the Defense Department’s – and even more so other departments’ – ability and willingness to generate advisors, as well as the Iraqi security services’ desire and ability to reform. More fundamentally, while our report called for a political settlement that kept the Sunnis in Anbar province inside the tent, we overestimated the ability of the U.S. government to keep its eye on this issue and offer sufficient pressure on, and incentives to, the Iraqi government to give the Sunnis a fair piece of the pie.

Transition #10. Everyone’s Wingman

Ending on a more personal note, I feel incredibly fortunate to have been part of a great team at CNAS (and for Shawn and many others, also in government) who worked to bring principled and pragmatic solutions to the nation’s toughest security challenges. I feel particularly blessed to have had the opportunity to work closely with perhaps the most brilliant, insightful, caring, and hilarious person I’ve ever known, Shawn Brimley.

The opportunity to work with Shawn on the “Phased Transition” report, and afterward on many other projects inside and outside of government, was incredibly special to me. At the same time, I know that Shawn had a similarly outsized positive impact on hundreds more colleagues, and through his writing on many thousands more. So, in a very real sense, to everyone he knew, Shawn was a wingman.



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*A Path Out of the Desert?
Shawn Brimley and the
Debate Over Iraq*

DR. COLIN H. KAHL

In 2007-2008, Iraq just barely managed to escape the death grip of all-out civil war. After years of occupation, insurgency, and sectarian strife, a confluence of decisions and changing dynamics on the ground turned the tide. The “surge” of 30,000 additional U.S. military forces approved by President George W. Bush in January 2007 enabled a new counterinsurgency strategy and greater partnering with Iraqi security forces (ISF) to protect the Iraqi population, especially in Baghdad. Near simultaneously, the calculations of Iraq’s Sunni community changed: Many former insurgents and sympathizers came to fear al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Shia militia more than U.S. troops, essentially switching sides and turning to the Americans for protection. This “Awakening” sucked much of the oxygen out of the Sunni rebellion. U.S. special operations forces, using tactics and technologies honed from years of high-value targeting and raids in Iraq and Afghanistan, then crippled much of what was left of AQI’s network. Stepped-up U.S. military pressure, intra-Shia military and political competition, and intercession by Iran also combined to incentivize firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to stand down his fearsome Jaysh al-Mahdi militia. After years of falling prey to a vicious cycle, Iraq’s security environment finally seemed to be entering a more virtuous one.

Yet the war remained deeply controversial in the United States. America was in the midst of a presidential election cycle where Iraq was a crucial issue. Then-Senator Barack Obama’s early opposition to the Iraq invasion had helped give him an edge with left-leaning progressives, assisting his Democratic Party primary victory over Hillary Clinton, who had initially backed the war. Iraq was also a key issue in the general election, with Obama calling for an orderly withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq to strategically rebalance American foreign policy and his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, calling for an open-ended “Korea-style” U.S. commitment.

In the think tank community too, there were contending voices. Left-leaning organizations tended to reinforce the Democratic Party consensus calling for a speedy departure of U.S. troops, while right-leaning think tanks called for the United States to leave tens of thousands of forces in Iraq in perpetuity to consolidate gains and counter Iran. But both approaches seemed fraught. A precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq risked genocidal levels of violence, the emergence of a terrorist safe haven, and cascading regional instability. On the other hand, an open-ended commitment risked a quagmire and military overstretch that would make it difficult to devote essential resources to the war in Afghanistan and rising challenges elsewhere around the globe.

In this context, Shawn Brimley, then a senior analyst at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), helped shape the conversation on the Iraq war and the future of America’s involvement in the country in crucial ways. Measured by two key criteria – policy impact and the prescience of the analysis – the Iraq work Brimley contributed to at CNAS proved incredibly important.

Policy Impact

In a series of reports, policy briefings, and articles in 2007-2008, Brimley and his CNAS colleagues called on the Bush administration and its successor to adopt a principled

middle alternative to “all out” or “all in” approaches. In June 2007, Brimley and Jim Miller co-authored a widely read CNAS report titled “Phased Transition: A Responsible Way Forward and Out of Iraq.” The report sought to operationalize the recommendations of the 2006 bipartisan Iraq Study Group report. “Phased Transition” called for the United States to draw down from surge-level forces of around 160,000 to 60,000 forces within two years, and to refocus the efforts of these residual forces on a narrower counterterrorism and advise-and-assist mission. Over time, remaining U.S. troops would gradually withdraw completely from Iraq, eventually shifting to an “over-the-horizon” posture, ideally by the end of 2012.¹

One year later, Brimley, along with Michèle Flournoy and me, published a follow-on CNAS study titled “Shaping the Iraq Inheritance.” The report updated the previous study’s recommendations to account for the improved security environment produced by the surge and the Bush administration’s planned return to pre-surge troop levels by the end of 2008. Crucially, “The Iraq Inheritance” provided a much more detailed political strategy, dubbed “conditional engagement,” that aimed to make security gains more sustainable.² Instead of unilaterally setting a fixed timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the study recommended negotiating both the contours of the U.S. military drawdown and the long-term American security commitment to Iraq in a manner designed to best incentivize Iraqi political reconciliation. The CNAS team argued that the United States should begin a gradual withdrawal of American forces, aiming to get down to a residual presence of around 60,000 forces by mid-2010. However, Washington should also condition the pace of the drawdown and the ultimate duration of the residual American counterterrorism and training presence on agreement by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Shia-majority government to a series of political accommodations with Iraq’s Sunni and Kurdish minorities, including: integrating significant numbers of former Sunni combatants and tribal Awakening forces (collectively referred to as the Sons of Iraq) into the Iraqi army and police and other ministries; passing oil and revenue sharing legislation; and agreeing to a formula to address Arab-Kurd disputes in contested territories such as Kirkuk. The report also called for continued Iraqi efforts to improve governance, including: conducting free and fair elections; efforts to resettle Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons; improving essential services; and continued professionalization of the Iraqi security forces. While a continued U.S. military presence could help provide the space for political deals and capacity-building along these lines, Brimley and his CNAS colleagues argued that a shift toward a more conditional security relationship was ultimately essential to incentivize true accommodation and produce “sustainable stability.” Moreover, to succeed, the authors concluded that the effort needed to start immediately, taking advantage of the Bush administration’s ongoing negotiations with the Iraqi government to establish a status of forces agreement (SOFA), governing the presence and legal status of U.S. forces, and a strategic framework agreement (SFA), outlining the long-term U.S.-Iraq partnership.

“Shaping the Iraq Inheritance” was premised on three key assumptions. The first was that, in the absence of essential political accommodations across Iraq’s ethno-sectarian divide, any security gains from an enduring U.S. military presence would be unsustainable. Second, Brimley and his co-authors argued that the dependence of the Iraqi political class on the American security umbrella gave Washington a window of opportunity

to negotiate arrangements with the Iraqis that would define the contours and timeline of a U.S. military drawdown and condition continued security assistance on agreement by the Iraqi government to political steps to address underlying ethno-sectarian grievances. Third, and finally, this window of opportunity would close, and potentially close fast, as the Iraqis became more confident in their own military capabilities and thus less dependent on Washington. So, the report argued, the ideal time to push for this security-accommodation grand bargain was in the final months of the Bush administration in the context of ongoing negotiations over the SOFA and SFA.

Although the Bush administration took note of the CNAS reports, they appeared to have little impact on its policy down the homestretch. However, they did seem to influence key policy choices made by the incoming Obama administration. The studies were widely read in the Pentagon. In particular, General Ray Odierno closely read the “Iraq Inheritance” as he prepared to take over command of all coalition forces in Iraq in 2008 and present options to the incoming president. Brimley and his co-authors also provided direct inputs to the Obama campaign, including a confidential memo Brimley and I sent to the campaign in September 2008 operationalizing the CNAS recommendations in the context of Obama’s statements and commitments regarding Iraq. And, importantly, CNAS had a seat at the table as President Obama considered his options: Flournoy led Obama’s Pentagon transition team before being named under secretary of defense for policy shortly after the inauguration; Brimley entered the administration as her special assistant; Miller became Flournoy’s principal deputy; and I ran the Iraq portfolio as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East. As such, the CNAS team was heavily involved in the 30-day strategic review of Iraq policy that Obama ordered at the beginning of his presidency.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama had called for a withdrawal of all 14 post-surge combat brigades in Iraq over a 16-month period. But candidate Obama had also intentionally given himself some wiggle room to ensure that the drawdown could be conducted responsibly when and if he became president. Specifically, Obama said he would consider making adjustments to his timeline based on recommendations from his commanders on the ground, and he was willing to leave a residual force behind to focus on “noncombat” missions, defined as targeted counterterrorism, training the ISF, and protecting U.S. civilians operating in Iraq. The size of the residual presence was left intentionally vague. This provided intellectual space for a pragmatic middle ground position. Ultimately, Obama signed off on an option presented by Odierno to withdraw all “combat brigades” and “end the combat mission” within 19 months while leaving a transitional military presence of around 50,000 troops to focus on counterterrorism, training, managing Arab-Kurd disputes, and protecting the U.S. civilian mission. The outcome was remarkably similar to what Brimley and his CNAS co-authors had recommended.

Prescience

In addition to being impactful, two key elements of Brimley’s Iraq work proved particularly prescient: the contention that security gains would prove difficult to sustain in the absence of fundamental political accommodation among Iraq’s competing

ethno-sectarian factions; and the notion that U.S. leverage to incentivize such accommodations would decline over time.

In 2007 and 2008, Brimley and his colleagues repeatedly warned that security gains from the surge and a smaller, post-surge U.S. military presence would likely collapse if the Maliki government failed to make fundamental political accommodations to address ethno-sectarian tensions, especially lingering grievances among elements of the Sunni community that had turned away from insurgency and AQI during the Awakening. "It is obvious where this road might end," Brimley and I argued in an August 26, 2008, op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*. "The last time tens of thousands of armed Sunni men were humiliated in Iraq – by disbanding the Baath Party and Iraqi army in May 2003 – an insurgency began, costing thousands of U.S. lives and throwing Iraq into chaos. Yet Maliki and his advisors risk provoking Iraq's Sunni community into another round of violence" by persecuting Iraqi Awakening forces.³

This is exactly what happened. Even before the departure of U.S. forces in 2011, Maliki had failed to live up to power-sharing promises made in the context of 2010 government formation talks, and he refused to follow through on commitments to integrate Sunni Awakening forces into the ISF and Iraqi ministries. After the U.S. withdrawal, Maliki threatened and arrested senior Sunni politicians, and ties between the Baghdad government and Sunni tribes in northern and western Iraq collapsed. The final straw for the Sunni community was the heavy-handed response of Shia-dominated ISF to Sunni political protests in Anbar province in 2013. The resulting Sunni alienation – in combination with the chaos in neighboring Syria – produced fertile ground for AQI to re-emerge as Islamic State (ISIS).

A second prediction – that U.S. leverage to influence Iraqi politics was a wasting asset – also proved prescient. The conditional engagement approach Brimley and his co-authors advocated was rooted in the claim that most segments of the Iraqi political class – Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds – continued to depend on U.S. assistance to ensure their survival and broker disagreements among them. However, Brimley and his colleagues argued that this leverage would shrink over time as the Iraqi central government became more capable and confident. As Brimley, John Nagl, and I argued in a September 5, 2008, op-ed in *The New York Times*: "The biggest challenge America will face [in Iraq] is our rapidly diminishing leverage."⁴

For precisely this reason, Brimley and his CNAS co-authors urged the Bush administration to condition U.S. assistance on necessary political accommodations and governance reforms while American support still remained indispensable. The most opportune moment was late 2008, because ongoing SOFA and SFA negotiations between the Bush administration and Maliki's government would set the contours for the American military presence moving forward and the nature of the long-term U.S.-Iraq strategic relationship.⁵ Bush's SOFA, finalized in November 2008, ultimately set a timeline for the eventual departure of all U.S. forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, with continued U.S. security assistance thereafter governed by the SFA. Yet these accords contained no conditions for continued U.S. support through 2011 or beyond. Instead of playing hard to get and conditioning continued U.S. military help on specific Iraqi political commitments,

as Brimley and his co-authors recommended, the administration essentially reversed the negotiating leverage by convincing Maliki's government that the top U.S. priority was to sustain our military presence as long as possible, no strings attached.

The Obama administration could also be faulted for not taking a sufficiently conditional approach to Maliki's government. But, as Brimley et al. predicted, the leverage the Obama team would have to execute this strategy was substantially less than the Bush administration possessed. This was obvious during the 2011 U.S.-Iraq negotiations for a follow-on SOFA, where even modest conditionality hit a brick wall. At some political risk, Obama was willing to leave 5,000 U.S. trainers in Iraq beyond the 2011 withdrawal date, but the president insisted that any agreement contain the same legally binding (and Iraqi Parliament-approved) protections for American troops they had under the 2008 SOFA, and for Maliki to commit to certain reforms to the Iraqi Defense and Interior Ministries. But Iraqi domestic politics made it impossible to reach such a deal. The U.S. military presence remained profoundly unpopular among the Iraqi populace (outside of Kurdistan), and Maliki was only willing to consider going to Parliament to approve a follow-on SOFA if other political factions backed him up. Yet other powerful Shia actors, especially the Sadrists, opposed the move, and even Sunni politicians who privately supported a continued U.S. military presence knew that most of their Sunni constituents did not. The Sunni bloc also sought to condition its support on Maliki agreeing to additional political concessions, which Maliki was unwilling to make. Only the Kurds were actively backed a follow-on agreement – but they could not convince others to go along. A big reason U.S. conditionality failed was the fact that the security environment had improved and Iraqi capabilities and confidence had grown. Apparent U.S. success in building up the ISF, handing over day-to-day control of security to them, and sustaining security gains from 2009-2011 even as American G.I.s departed meant that Maliki and other key Iraqi politicians were not nearly as dependent on a continued U.S. presence as they had been during the 2008 SOFA/SFA talks. So, Iraqi factions prioritized their narrow political interests in opposing an enduring American military presence and using the negotiations to outflank their domestic rivals, making a follow-on, Parliament-approved SOFA untenable. Indeed, it was not until the second half of 2014, after AQI rose from the ashes as ISIS and captured large swaths of northern and western Iraq, that Iraqi desperation for American assistance returned, giving the Obama administration a fresh opportunity to demand fundamental changes in Iraq's government (including Maliki stepping down as prime minister) as a prerequisite for U.S. military intervention.

Conclusion

Shawn Brimley was one of the best and brightest national security and defense thinkers of his generation. Although Brimley's work on Iraq represented only one small part of his intellectual legacy, it was an important one. Indeed, as the United States once again contemplates its long-term relationship with Iraq in the aftermath of the defeat of ISIS, Brimley's central insight – that the continued presence of American forces is an important but not sufficient condition for Iraqi stability – remains as relevant today as it was a decade ago



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2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report

DR. KATHLEEN HICKS AND SAM BRANNEN

If God really hates you, you may end up working on a Quadrennial Defense Review: The most pointless and destructive planning effort imaginable. You will waste two years on a document decoupled from a real world force plan, from an honest set of decisions about manpower or procurement, with no clear budget or FYDP, and with no metrics to measure or determine its success.

—Anthony Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Shawn Brimley loved that quote. Tony Cordesman published it just as we, along with Shawn, were kicking off the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). From 1997 through 2014, the QDR served as the capstone strategic planning document for the Department of Defense. The QDR was both a strategic review process and a public report.¹ For any would-be defense wonk worth his or her salt, contributing to a national-level strategy process is a rite of passage. Make no mistake, it's a love-hate relationship for those who have been through the exercise of drafting a QDR. While we grimaced at the truth in Cordesman's quote, we also shared a belief in the essential nature of strategic planning to ensure the nation's future defense. And no defense analyst believed in the power of strategy and ideas more than Shawn.

Shawn made his QDR opportunity count, helping to guide the Department of Defense's vision at an important moment in history. In 2010, the QDR was a highly watched test of the new Obama administration on matters of defense and national security. The changeover between the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations was the first wartime presidential transition in 50 years. As Shawn and his colleagues pointed out in articles leading up to the transition, the Obama administration had "inherited" two active conflicts and large-scale military occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq, neither of which had a neat end in sight.² The Bush White House worked with bipartisan spirit during the hard-fought campaign between Senators John McCain and Barack Obama, coordinating with both campaigns' national security teams to ensure a smooth transition regardless of which party won the presidency. Continuing in that spirit of bipartisanship and continuity of government – and in the first instance since Lyndon B. Johnson chose to keep on Robert McNamara – President Obama asked President Bush's second secretary of defense, Bob Gates, to remain in his cabinet.

Throughout 2008, Gates had become an outspoken critic of what he called the Pentagon's "Next-War-itis" and the lack of urgency he saw from top military and civilian leaders to win "today's wars."³ Gates later described these concerns in his Pentagon memoirs:

I felt strongly that we had to prepare our forces for the future ... to fight all along the spectrum of conflict, from counterterrorism to taking on well-armed nonstate groups ... to fighting conventional nation-states. Developing this broad range of capabilities meant taking some time and resources away from preparations for the high-end future missions the military services preferred.⁴

These views made Gates a polarizing figure, with some in the Defense Department keen to move on from the post-9/11 operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere that were consuming resources and forestalling some future force investments.

The choice of a leader so focused on achieving victory in these two unpopular wars seemed initially odd for Obama, who had campaigned on ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But Obama was serious in believing that the United States must be “as careful getting out as we were careless getting in,”⁵ and he thought Gates was the secretary of defense to do it, along with his new undersecretary of defense for policy, Michèle Flournoy. Perhaps Obama also shared Gates’s concern with “Next-War-itis,” and an implicit distrust of the military-industrial complex. Against the backdrop of war and the continuing campaign against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, and with China’s military growing ever more capable, the stakes were high for the 2010 QDR.

The broader strategic context for the QDR was complicated not only by diverse views on strategic priorities within the Pentagon, but also by the overlapping congressional requirements of a concurrent Nuclear Posture Review, Ballistic Missile Defense Review, and Space Posture Review. The report also was under scrutiny from the congressionally mandated QDR Independent Panel, along with a first-of-its-kind internal Department of Defense QDR “red team” led by Director of the Office of Net Assessment Andy Marshall and then-Commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command General James Mattis.

The context for the QDR was also being set beyond the five sides of the Pentagon. Elsewhere in the executive branch, inaugural Quadrennial Homeland Security and Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Reviews were beginning. The National Security staff was also working on the new administration’s first National Security Strategy that was to inform all strategic guidance documents. National Security Advisor Tom Donilon and Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough made clear to interagency stakeholders – and the Pentagon in particular – that maintaining consistency across all reviews was paramount. As frequently occurs, the QDR was to be published first among these developing national security documents, with key directions on strategy set, at least for a time, through interagency debates over DoD’s text.

Shawn was a key member of the QDR development and writing team from its beginning, where he worked closely with us. Although Shawn was technically assigned to the undersecretary of defense for policy’s office, Flournoy had “forward deployed” him to the QDR effort being run out of the subordinate Office of the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Forces (run by Hicks). From this vantage point, Shawn served in a role Flournoy often described for him: her “intellectual alter-ego.” For years prior, first at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, alongside us, and later at the Center for a New American Security, Flournoy and Shawn had collaborated on a series of articles laying out their thoughts on the best practices and needed direction for defense strategy. Shawn welcomed the opportunity to translate key ideas developed in the think tank environment to the strategic reality of a military at war. A deeply gifted writer, Shawn “held the pen” for several core sections of the document. These included the descriptions of the global environment, posture and initiatives for improving defense-to-defense relations with other countries, and defense reform elements.

Moreover, he helped craft the document's major leitmotif that sought to resolve the tensions between Gates's imperative for the DoD to focus on the wars it was in and prepare in earnest for the complex future it would face. So it was that two years before the Obama administration's use of "rebalance" would become associated with its Asia strategy, the 2010 QDR spoke of "rebalancing the force" temporally across the present and the future.

Government documents rarely have a single author, and the 2010 QDR was no exception. However, one area that Shawn could rightly claim as his own was the strategy's emphasis on assured access to the "global commons," in particular international waters, cyberspace, and space.⁶ Shawn had written about the global commons while still at CNAS, and he and Flournoy released an influential article on U.S. "command of the global commons" in July 2009, more than six months before the release of the QDR.⁷ The theme resonated across the administration. Its emphasis on global norms echoed the president's belief that the United States played a unique role in ensuring what the first National Security Strategy called the "peace and prosperity" of the international system. In years ahead, the theme of assured access to the global commons also informed evolving U.S. policy regarding Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea and U.S. military posture decisions, including the Asia rebalance that would emerge in the Defense Strategic Guidance two years later, and became the centerpiece of initiatives from Secretaries of Defense Chuck Hagel and Ash Carter (who also championed the policy when serving as deputy secretary of defense). At the outset of the QDR, assuring access to the commons also informed requirements for future military capabilities against a challenge set that the QDR referred to as anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities of high-end adversaries, work that foreshadowed Shawn's later interest in the third offset.⁸

Shawn's role as a convening figure for ideas has been well-captured by his contemporaries. He identified both specific ideas and specific individuals with whom he formed intellectual relationships. In the latter case, these professional connections always evolved to include personal friendships for Shawn. His unique interpersonal diplomacy was a strength in efforts to bring a unity of strategic vision to the big thinkers, big ideas, and of course big egos that vied to shape the QDR.

Shawn was less interested, less experienced, and thus less successful at managing the bureaucratic realities that descend on a QDR team. Following standard operating procedure was simply not high on Shawn's to-do list, as two examples demonstrate. First was his failure to faithfully record and report up his chain concerns with the document. Every military service, every combatant command, every special interest of any stripe within the Pentagon mobilized a QDR team to make sure that its voice was heard in the process. Adjudicating proposed inputs to the document from these various parties - as well as those in the interagency system - is the bane of a QDR team's existence. For any major document being debated in government, a massive spreadsheet is typically developed to track all comments and document the official response to every point raised. Senior leadership can review the disposition of comments to approve them and be prepared for major issues that may come back to them at higher ranks. In the 2010 QDR, the responsibility for the comment tracker fell on the QDR's executive secretariat and

Shawn. Late in the finalization of the QDR, we came to learn by chance that Shawn had given up on documenting the adjudication of various comments and edits pouring in from Pentagon components across the globe. This led to some rather heated exchanges from those who, rightly, felt their inputs were ignored without any explanation. After some scrambling at higher levels, all issues were resolved.

A second issue arose with document control. Unbeknownst to his leadership, Shawn had taken to working on the unclassified “pre-decisional” QDR document from home and emailing the file with certain validators inside the Pentagon and beyond. Although a common practice in the think tank world from which he had come, it was not common for major Pentagon products, for which concerns about version control and leaks of even unclassified drafts are paramount. But Shawn’s penchant for oversharing – collaboration and transparency, in his view – got the best of him. The pre-decisional draft he had been working with indeed leaked in late January, more than one week before the QDR’s planned release and with key substantive edits yet to be incorporated. It was a feeding frenzy for the various Pentagon insider newsletters that thrive on the minutiae of internal debates. Together with the document adjudication lapse, the QDR draft leak taught Shawn early lessons in the high-stakes world of Pentagon bureaucracy, which does not always go willingly where a defense intellectual might seek to lead it. When we reminded Shawn of the QDR episodes in later conversations, he brushed them off with a characteristic smirk and shrug of the shoulders. Yet evidence suggests that he had absorbed the lessons nonetheless. On at least one occasion after the QDR was published, Shawn’s eagerness to adhere to Pentagon processes was evident to his colleagues. In preparing a memo for the secretary of defense in 2011, one co-worker recalls his attention to every procedural detail, painstakingly coordinating disparate inputs and even ensuring that he generated the memo’s administrative tracking barcode correctly. Although perhaps not process-observant by nature, Shawn did learn from his minor bureaucratic misadventures.

We believe the QDR 2010 experience was a critical milestone in Shawn’s development as a writer, collaborator, analyst, and leader. His intellectual influence on the document is undeniable. After the QDR, he assisted in the development of the National Security Space Strategy, further shaping how the United States thinks about challenges in the global commons. He also took on a team leadership role in the Strategy Office, his first substantial experience helping other strategists realize their ideas, and helped his colleagues in the Plans Office to flesh out the Obama administration’s key global defense posture initiatives. When he left the Defense Department in 2011 for the National Security Council staff, he took with him a well-earned reputation as a creative thinker with the skills to listen, mentor, and drive strategic thought for the defense community.

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1. After the 2014 QDR, Congress eliminated the QDR requirement, ultimately replacing it with a requirement to produce a National Defense Strategy. The NDS has far fewer public reporting requirements than the QDR. Moreover, the legislation is intended to incent a detailed classified strategy from DoD leadership in addition to a public document.
2. Colin H. Kahl, Michèle Flournoy, and Shawn Brimley, “Shaping the Iraq Inheritance” (Center for a New American Security, June 11, 2008), https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/FlournoyKahlBrimley_Iraq-Inheritance_June08.pdf?mtime=20160906082324.
3. See, for example, Robert M. Gates, “Remarks to the Heritage Foundation” (Colorado Springs, CO, May 13, 2008), <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1240>.
4. Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 119.
5. Comment by Barack Obama during January 21, 2008, presidential debate, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/21/debate.main/index.html>.
6. See U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (February 2010), xiv, 8, and 13, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf.
7. Flournoy and Brimley rooted their thoughts in Barry Posen’s seminal piece, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security*, 28 no. 1 (Summer 2003), 5-46. See also Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, “The Contested Commons,” *Proceedings Magazine*, 135 no. 7 (July 2009), 277.
8. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 103.

The Brimley Doctrine and the Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific

LINDSEY W. FORD, JIM MITRE, AND SUSANNA V. BLUME

We first met Shawn early in the Obama administration while he was working on the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*. This document was a tremendous accomplishment, but Shawn did not take an opportunity to rest on his laurels after its completion. Instead, he launched directly into the next task, which was a review of our global defense posture, the disposition of U.S. forces overseas. It was out of this effort that the Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific was born, one of the most enduring legacies of the Obama administration's foreign policy. Shawn was a principal architect of that policy.

The Bush administration had begun to pursue a policy of retrenchment, garrisoning forces in the homeland on the theory that they could be rapidly deployed to trouble spots as needed. This shift in U.S. military posture was a part of then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's broader transformation agenda, and the policy had considerable support in Congress. In general, politicians prefer U.S. service members to boost local economies in their districts, rather than in foreign countries.

Operationally and domestically, the Rumsfeld-era posture change had value. Strategically, however, it was wanting. Shawn firmly believed that U.S. posture is the clearest sign of America's commitment to defending its interests; it is critical to U.S. grand strategy as a messaging device. As the Department of Defense was beginning to lift its gaze from conducting two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Shawn was quick to see that our overseas posture was ill-suited for the future. The United States' interests in the Asia-Pacific were growing, and U.S. defense posture needed an overhaul to appropriately message U.S. commitment to the region.

Shawn was instrumental in developing the guiding principles that would underpin the Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. Most concretely, he set the direction for how U.S. defense posture in the region would evolve. The department would pursue what colleagues later referred to in jest as "The Brimley Doctrine," a defense posture in the Asia-Pacific that was geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable. Shawn drafted a white paper that laid out the imperative for change.

First, Shawn saw a window of opportunity for the United States to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian states whose fast-growing economies were intertwined with long-term U.S. prosperity. The Department of Defense had a role to play in working with Southeast Asian states to address shared security challenges, such as counterterrorism, counterpiracy, and natural disasters. U.S. forces, therefore, must break out of large garrisons in Northeast Asia and seek new opportunities for substantive engagement in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. A "geographically distributed" posture was intended to message Southeast Asian states the willingness of the U.S. military to become a security partner of choice.

Second, Shawn noted that as China rose it had a choice to either buck the current international order or seek to join it. China was increasingly transferring its economic strength into military strength, growing its potential to undermine stability in the Asia-Pacific. To provide a hard-power backstop to deter potential Chinese aggression, U.S. defense posture in Asia would have to evolve. In the face of the increasing anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) challenges posed by China, the military would have to disburse, harden,

disguise, and be prepared to actively defend its physical infrastructure. “Operationally resilient” was intended as a brand name for U.S. forces that messaged their ability to fight within a contested A2/AD environment and, in so doing, message the credibility of U.S. deterrence.

Third, while on balance forward-stationed U.S. forces provide a tremendous benefit to their host nations, Shawn was not unaware of the legitimate concerns that allies had about hosting U.S. forces in large numbers. In particular, urbanization in Japan and South Korea in the 50-plus years since the end of World War II meant that a few U.S. bases were now in heavily populated areas with a host of complicated political dynamics. The department had to work with Asian allies to ensure that U.S. military presence in their countries remained “politically sustainable,” even if that meant moving bases to less-populated areas.

The white paper’s logic was compelling, yet Shawn knew that a white paper alone does not get things done in the world’s largest bureaucracy. His passion for Asia-Pacific posture was infectious, and he deftly forged a movement inside the Pentagon that turned his ideas into reality. Starting with Secretary Robert Gates’s Shangri-La speech in June 2010, in which Shawn introduced to the public his brand-new doctrine, the department executed Shawn’s vision during the remaining years of the Obama administration. U.S. forces in Asia did diversify their geographic footprint through new rotations to Australia, Singapore, and the Philippines. The department made substantial investments in base resiliency in the region. U.S. military posture became more politically sustainable through continued work with the governments of Japan and the Republic of Korea to relocate U.S. garrisons farther from congested urban areas, while maintaining the operational credibility of those forces throughout.

More broadly, the way that Shawn thought about and talked about force posture, the hows and whys of U.S. military presence overseas, and posture’s relation to strategy, was formative to the way we, and many others, think about these issues. In this way, Shawn help shaped a whole generation of foreign policy practitioners.

The views presented are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, its components, or the U.S. Government.

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*On 'Renewing
America's Strategic Solvency':
A Tribute to Shawn Brimley's
Intellectual Contributions to
American Grand Strategy*

JACOB STOKES

Devising effective foreign policy strategy requires a long-term vision and a willingness to make proposals whose wisdom might only become accepted later on. Innovative foreign policy ideas often prove contentious or unpopular at the time. Shawn Brimley understood this and possessed the intellectual fortitude to advance his views anyway. The essay I had the honor of co-authoring with him, “Renewing America’s Strategic Solvency,” shows how Shawn embodied the essential traits of a strategic thinker, and why the U.S. grand strategy debate will be less vibrant without his contributions.¹

The piece is short, but it contains examples of three qualities that enabled Shawn to offer insights for the formulation of U.S. grand strategy during his life.²

Challenging Orthodoxy

First, Shawn was willing to make brave arguments that bucked established orthodoxy. At the time this piece was published in February 2013, two prominent strains of thought dominated the policy debate surrounding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as they related to U.S. grand strategy overall. The first argued that the United States could create and sustain its position in the world only by retaining and even expanding its international commitments and pursuing maximalist objectives. For this school, demonstrations of resolve were the determinative factor in the success of America’s foreign policy.³ In practical terms, this meant doubling down on long wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the Middle East. For proponents of this line of thinking, any opposition to deepening involvement in those conflicts equated to shirking America’s leadership role in the world and abandoning U.S. allies. For the most strident adherents of this argument, failing to support ever-expanding U.S. roles in these conflicts stemmed from a lack of faith in U.S. moral righteousness and global strategic purpose.

On the polar opposite side of the debate sat analysts who not only opposed deeper U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan but also broadened their opposition to make a case for the United States to move to a largely isolationist grand strategy. Their basic claim was that the wars were misadventures in overextension, the outgrowth of a United States whose power had gone into overdrive.⁴ As a result, this school contended, Washington policymakers found themselves going abroad in search of monsters to destroy. Scholars advancing this viewpoint argued not only for an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but also for a broader pullback from U.S. commitments abroad, including reducing support to longtime democratic allies in Europe and East Asia.⁵ This strain of thought also had its highly ideological proponents, many of whom questioned the moral value of U.S. leadership in the world.⁶

Shawn rejected both of these models as representing false choices. He supported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but not as indefinite “forever wars.” He instead advocated a model focused on countering terrorism and training local forces rather than engaging in prolonged nation-building campaigns in those countries.⁷ Shawn’s assessment reflected a view he had honed as a foreign policy practitioner while working as director for strategic planning on the National Security Council for President Barack Obama and at the Department of Defense before that.

Shawn sought selective and time-bound engagement in these conflicts, and he did so with a larger strategic picture in mind.⁸ Shawn was a staunch proponent of a United States that was powerful and active globally. He saw an engaged and influential America as necessary for advancing security, prosperity, and liberal values around the world. He was fully invested in the continuation of American power far into the future.⁹

At the same time, Shawn observed two major trends that he believed U.S. strategy needed to account for: In too many areas the wellsprings of American power at home – the seed corn of future global leadership – were being neglected. And rising powers, especially China and Russia, were gathering strength and methodically cultivating their ability to compete more effectively in areas that would decide who ran the world in the coming decades. Taking those two trends seriously required the types of policies he suggested in this piece – that is, to make a serious and sustained campaign to bolster the foundations of U.S. power at home in order to sustain U.S. global leadership over time. That was the essence of “strategic solvency,” trimming strategic liabilities while stockpiling strategic capital.¹⁰ It might seem obvious today, but at the time, this was not a widely shared policy view – especially not among the Washington national security establishment – so it took guts to advocate for it.¹¹

Immigrant Strategist

The second quality that made Shawn’s contributions impressive came from the way he approached the work. Shawn’s views flowed from two major inputs: his vantage point as an immigrant and the lessons he drew from being a serious student of strategy and history.

Shawn was born in and grew up in Canada. Historically, American foreign policy, like the nation it serves, has benefited tremendously from imported talent. Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Nicholas Spykman, Hans Morgenthau, and Fareed Zakaria were all born outside the United States, to name some illustrative examples. Shawn provided another example in this same mold, coming down from Canada to make his own contributions to the American strategy in his era.

Like many immigrants, Shawn brought with him a personal and visceral understanding of the sources of U.S. power, especially American values and the power of the U.S. example. Shawn had been on the receiving end of American soft power growing up, and it resonated with him through to his core. He was so captivated by the United States that he chose to become a U.S. citizen and spend his professional life working to advance the interests and values of his adopted country. As a result, Shawn was wholly dedicated to the American experiment, and it showed in his work.

In addition, Shawn approached the study of strategic affairs and history with an intense seriousness. Shawn had read and internalized the lessons of great powers throughout history. The neatly arranged books in his always-pristine office spoke to the range and depth of his inquiry. The worn covers, dog-eared pages, and scribbled margin notes told a story about Shawn’s committed scholarship. He took to heart

history's lessons regarding how rising powers gain a step on status quo powers, and why pre-eminent states begin to fall behind.

As a result, Shawn knew the importance of economic strength, societal cohesion, and investments for the future in innovation, science, and education. Shawn wanted the United States to meet the future as the country on earth best-positioned to seize its opportunities. His policy recommendations tended to flow from this central goal. Shawn steadfastly heeded George Marshall's famous advice to George Kennan to "avoid trivia" and Dean Acheson's call for strategists to look "beyond the vision of the operating officers caught in the smoke and crises of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to come and outline what should be done to meet or anticipate them."¹²

In short, Shawn's strategic outlook fused relevant personal experience, deep knowledge, and a keen strategic sensibility. The result was that when national security leaders at every level sought advice about world affairs, an uncommon number looked to Shawn. He was only 40 years old – still quite young by the standards of the foreign policy field. But he frequently generated insights few others could about how to navigate the pitfalls and opportunities presented by a treacherous international landscape.

Proved Prescient

Third, events since this essay's publication have underscored the essential validity of Shawn's arguments. In 2013, his clarion call for tending to the wellsprings of American power through selective retrenchment seemed to some observers to be astrategic, little more than a call to lay down the burdens of global power leadership and leave the rest of the world to manage itself.

But those appraisals missed the mark then, and they are even more misguided now. The most important trend in global affairs today is the rise of authoritarian powers, led by China and Russia.¹³ These powers threaten the U.S.-led international order across all dimensions – political, economic, military, and values. Moreover, the accelerating pace of technological change puts a premium on maintaining an innovation edge to sustain both economic advantage and military supremacy. Great-power competition will be decided based on strengths that begin domestically and then emanate out from there. The battle for global influence must be just that – global – but no nation can win it without first maintaining its strength at home.¹⁴

Five years have gone by since Shawn published this essay, and the argument for leveraging domestic renewal as a means of fulfilling strategic goals has become stronger. Again, as Shawn took pains to emphasize, that renewal would not and should not come at the cost of U.S. global engagement but rather should be designed to strengthen America's hand abroad. America maintains the best fundamentals for prolonged influence of any country on earth.¹⁵ Nevertheless, U.S. pre-eminence is neither preordained nor irreversible, and real challenges abound. Donald Trump's election was arguably a symptom of those problems, not the cause, but it has nevertheless emphasized the degree to which America stands at a strategic crossroads.

To extend U.S. predominance, the United States must tackle the types of domestic challenges Shawn identified in this essay. Safeguarding the integrity of our democracy requires finding ways to deter and punish meddling by foreign adversaries. Retaining the U.S. military-technological edge while also building sufficiently large defense forces requires reform for the Defense Department, improving congressional oversight, and steadier budgets. Ensuring the United States has the funds to pay for such a military will, eventually, require broader fiscal policy solutions that rein in unsustainable debt through a combination of increased revenue and reductions in entitlement spending.

Reforming U.S. education and immigration policies will be essential to ensure that American companies, research universities, and government scientific bodies can invent and operationalize future technologies such as quantum computing, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and robotics.¹⁶ And ensuring broad-based prosperity along with social justice can deliver the societal cohesion necessary for prolonged global engagement.¹⁷ In addition, demonstrating the efficacy of democracy can reignite the flame of liberty in the hearts of people around the world while stamping out authoritarian impulses.

In short, events since Shawn's essay have revealed the fundamental soundness and insight of his point. Shawn advocated playing the "long game," as Derek Chollet has famously called Obama's foreign policy.¹⁸ But the virtues of such a strategy have already become clear in the medium term.

Think Like Shawn

Today more than ever, America needs analysts and policymakers who think like Shawn did: uncowed by conventional wisdom, imbued with strategic acumen and generous moral purpose, and fighting constantly to discern the long-term signal from the deafening noise. It is difficult to look out at the global strategic situation, observe the decidedly choppy waters ahead, and not come to the conclusion that losing Shawn means future U.S. grand strategy debates will always be lacking without his contributions. In the face of that dismal realization, the only proper way to honor Shawn's legacy is to make his principles our watchwords – the United States and the world will be more secure, more prosperous, and more free if we do

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1. Jacob Stokes and Shawn Brimley, "Renewing America's Strategic Solvency" (Center for a New American Security, February 12, 2013), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/renewing-americas-strategic-solvency>.
 2. See, for example, Michèle Flournoy, Shawn Brimley, and Vikram J. Singh, "Making America Grand Again: Toward a New Grand Strategy" (Center for a New American Security, June 11, 2008).
 3. The best example of this argument comes from Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Stephen Sestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).
 4. The best distillation of this argument comes from Christopher A. Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009). See also John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, 95 no. 4 (July/August 2016).
 5. See, for example, Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009); and Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007).
 6. See, for example, Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003).
 7. Shawn Brimley, "The State of the Union: The President Struck the Right Tone," *WarOnTheRocks.com*, January 21, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/01/the-state-of-the-union-the-president-struck-the-right-tone/>; and Shawn Brimley, "Brimley: Slow But Steady in Afghanistan and Beyond," *CNAS.org*, May 27, 2014, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/blog/brimley-slow-but-steady-in-afghanistan-and-beyond>.
 8. Shawn Brimley, "The Danger of Strategic Distraction" (Center for a New American Security, August 28, 2013), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/the-danger-of-strategic-distraction>.
 9. Shawn was particularly concerned with fully realizing U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. See Shawn Brimley and Jerry Hendrix, "Let's Lock in the Rebalance to Asia," *DefenseOne.com*, March 26, 2015, http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2015/03/lets-lock-rebalance-asia/108589/?oref=d_brief_nl.
 10. The use of the term "solvency" in reference to U.S. foreign policy first came from Walter Lippmann. He used the term to describe the need for a politically sustainable foreign policy in a democratic system, although he considered the material foundations of power as well. See Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Grand Strategy for a Divided America," *Foreign Affairs*, 86 no. 4 (July/August 2007).
 11. Although Shawn held nontraditional views, he was not alone in this position. See also Richard N. Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); and Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back* (New York: Picador, 2011).
 12. As quoted in Daniel W. Drezner, ed., *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 3-4.
 13. The most incisive work on the centrality of great-power competition in international affairs today comes from Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). See also Geoff Dyer, *The Contest of the Century: The New Era of Competition With China - and How America Can Win* (New York: Knopf, 2014).
 14. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).
 15. Ely Ratner and Thomas Wright, "America's not in decline - it's on the rise," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americas-not-in-decline--its-on-the-rise/2013/10/18/4dde76be-35b1-11e3-80c6-7e6dd8d22d8f_story.html.
 16. Perhaps even more than his work on grand strategy, Shawn made significant contributions to the literature on maintaining the U.S. military-technological edge over its adversaries. See, for example, Robert O. Work and Shawn Brimley, "20YY: Preparing for War in the Robotic Age" (Center for a New American Security, January 2014).
 17. Harry Krejsa, "Heartland Security: Global Engagement Once Fueled the American Middle Class - and Can Again" (Center for a New American Security, February 2018).
 18. Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016).

Game Changers

BEN FITZGERALD AND KELLEY SAYLER

In September 2013, we co-authored “Game Changers: Disruptive Technology and U.S. Defense Strategy” with Shawn. This report drew from the findings of the Department of Defense’s NeXTech war game series, which sought to explore the nature and drivers of game-changing technologies with military significance. Ben led that project prior to his arrival at the Center for a New American Security and had asked for Shawn to participate to bring a strategic perspective to the science and technology, engineering, military, adversary, and ethical points of view the game design required. The CNAS report represented our effort to describe the changing contours of the military technology competition and its implications for U.S. defense strategy. The introduction to the paper concludes by saying: “We hope that this paper spurs additional work designed to better connect emerging technologies with U.S. policy and strategy development.” We’re not sure if that was true for anyone else, but it certainly proved to be the case for us as authors.

The core arguments outlined in the paper do not sound especially radical today: Rising powers and the accelerating diffusion of commercial technology are eroding U.S. military technical dominance; there are significant cultural and structural barriers to achieving the innovation required to arrest this trend; and, as a result, we must pursue new approaches to preserving our technological advantages. Indeed, many of these arguments are now so well-recognized that they are codified in the *2018 National Defense Strategy*, which notes that the United States “must anticipate the implications of new technologies on the battlefield, rigorously define the military problems anticipated in future conflict, and foster a culture of experimentation and calculated risk-taking.” We made these arguments in “Game Changers,” however, at a time when much of the Department of Defense was still focused on the low-end wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before Bob Work and Ash Carter returned to the department and established the innovation agenda. Before the Defense Innovation Initiative, the third offset strategy, or the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental. In short, before the department seemed to recognize that it had a problem.

When we wrote “Game Changers,” we all agreed on the general nature of this problem, but we did not agree on which of its constituent components were most consequential or which parts of the problem to prioritize in terms of seeking solutions. Shawn viewed the problem as one of defense strategy: revolutions of military affairs, concepts and force planning, and investment. Ben agreed with that problem set but was more concerned about technology strategy and innovation, believing that even if DoD could articulate the right defense strategy, the department would be incapable of implementing that strategy unless more fundamental changes were made across the department and the defense industrial base. Kelley was simply concerned by the general lack of agility and adaptivity in DoD technology development, integration, and employment.

One of Shawn’s great strengths as an analyst was his ability to be self-critical and to constructively criticize the work of others. Rereading “Game Changers” four years after its publication, we can say that our articulation of the strategic challenges that DoD needed to address stands up. Our recommendations, frankly, were not as compelling. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the weakness of the recommendations

was a function of the size of the problem we described. A short, single paper could not provide satisfying answers. However, the process of documenting our thoughts – and particularly, identifying disagreements – proved fruitful. Shawn’s next paper, published four months after “Game Changers,” was the seminal “20YY: Preparing for War in the Robotic Age,” co-authored with CNAS’ then new CEO, Bob Work. That paper provided the intellectual framework that underpinned Work’s later hallmark initiatives as deputy secretary of defense, including the third offset strategy. “20YY” outlined a vision of a new warfighting regime marked by the proliferation of unmanned and autonomous systems and provided specific recommendations for addressing the problems Shawn alluded to in the “Game Changers” discussion of technology competition. Its ideas were to have a lasting impact on DoD.

From “Game Changers,” Ben turned to a longer-term exploration of the intersection of strategy, technology, and business within a national security context. That line of effort led to a series of papers describing the strategic challenges faced by the Department of Defense and its industry partners, critiques of Carter’s innovation agenda, and, ultimately, the articulation of the vision and recommendations the “Game Changers” report needed in “Future Foundry: A New Strategic Approach to Military-Technical Advantage.”

For Kelley, Shawn’s infectious enthusiasm for the emerging technologies discussed in “Game Changers” inspired an abiding interest in exploring the development and application of such technologies as well as attendant implications for the U.S. military and the future of warfare. With Ben – and colleagues Paul Scharre and Mike Horowitz – she continued to examine these issues as a contributor to CNAS’ Proliferated Drones and Ethical Autonomy projects.

Shawn’s influence remained strong across this entire body of work. Throughout it all, he encouraged us to push the boundaries of the policy discussion – frequently exhorting us to exercise “thought leadership,” as he put it – and to offer relevant and actionable recommendations to policymakers. He ensured that we wrote clearly, and he even managed to rein in Ben’s penchant for the word “extant.”

As director of studies at CNAS, Shawn also pushed us to adopt innovative ways of conveying our message to policymakers. “Game Changers” started us down that path, as we experimented with a new report format and an intentionally lower word count. The response to that experiment, as well as Shawn’s ongoing advocacy, prompted us to continue to incorporate new research tools, media, and formats – including survey instruments, infographics, podcasts, web-native products, and partnerships with platforms like War on the Rocks – into our work. These innovations culminated in our Proliferated Drones microsite, about which, upon first viewing, Shawn excitedly exclaimed, “*You guys, this ... is ... fucking ... awesome!*”

Shawn didn’t just introduce us to new ideas, sharpen our thinking, and increase the level of innovation in our work; he also played an integral role in developing our careers. Ben departed CNAS to work directly on the problems first articulated in “Game Changers” on the Senate Armed Services Committee staff. Shawn actively supported

and helped facilitate this move despite being a Democrat and Ben going to work for the Republican majority. Shawn was central to CNAS' growth into an actively bipartisan think tank and he supported the work and careers of his colleagues accordingly. Ben now serves as director of the Office of Strategy and Design in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment. Kelley, with Shawn's encouragement, took an assignment to the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, where she supports some of the third offset analysis that began under Bob Work.

To outside observers, Shawn's impact on national security and defense strategy is most easily assessed by the significant intellectual contributions of his written work, but that does not adequately capture the true extent of his legacy. Instead, one needs to consider not only Shawn's work, but also the work on which he collaborated, influenced, and inspired; the lasting culture of innovation he created at CNAS; and the positive impact that those of us who were fortunate to work with him now seek to have. We hope that, in each of our respective roles, we are able to carry on some of the ideas that we first explored with Shawn in "Game Changers" and about which he was so passionate.

The views presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, its components, or the U.S. government.

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Pushing the Envelope of Ideas

PAUL SCHARRE

Everyone said we shouldn't publish it. Shawn wanted to do it anyway.

Shawn and I knew that the "Ctrl + Alt + Del: Resetting America's Military" article we did in the May/June 2014 issue of *Foreign Policy* was going to be controversial. I don't know that we could have anticipated the depth of emotion – both positive and negative – that we got in response to it, though.

The task had started simple enough. The editor at *FP* had reached out to Shawn to see if he would be interested in writing an article on re-envisioning the U.S. military. The task was to write about how we would build the military today if we were starting from scratch. A blank sheet of paper. *Tabula rasa*.

It was a fascinating intellectual exercise. The U.S. military today is a product of history, legislation, and numerous bureaucratic and organizational shifts over time. Defense policy nerds (as Shawn often proudly proclaimed himself) frequently debated what kinds of organizational changes might improve the DoD in a new round of Goldwater-Nichols-like reforms. But I'd never heard anyone even *ask* the question the *Foreign Policy* editor was asking: What if you could start from scratch?

It wasn't a practical question. You couldn't, of course, start from scratch. There is no magic wand to wave away 200+ years of history. But it was an interesting thought experiment nonetheless, so we leapt at the chance.

In the course of a few brainstorming sessions sitting around CNAS offices, Shawn and I rapidly deconstructed the Defense Department. Some things were easy. Obviously, you would shift the balance of our force structure away from legacy platforms optimized for re-fighting the Persian Gulf War and prioritize the kinds of capabilities needed in current and future conflicts. We quickly agreed the Air Force should cut short-range tactical fighters and reinvest in longer-range uninhabited ("unmanned") aircraft. The Army didn't need to be big. It needed to be modernized for high-end threats *and* more culturally savvy for small wars. The Navy needed to push its investments undersea, so it could operate inside an enemy's anti-access bubble. These weren't really controversial ideas, though. They had been articulated for years in official Defense Department strategy documents like the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (of which Shawn was a leading author), although follow-through in the budget had always been harder.

Things got more sporty once Shawn and I turned to organizational changes. Like many, we had often wondered why the U.S. military has two armies (the Army and Marine Corps), two navies (the Army has its own fleet of logistics ships), and four air forces (all four services have their own separate aircraft). This time, however, instead of simply musing at the silliness of this redundancy, we realized we could wish it away with the stroke of a pen. No more! One army, one navy, and one air force. And everyone would play nicely together (since we were imagining).

But even those divisions seemed anachronistic. After all, if one were organizing the military by domain today, then space and cyberspace would certainly merit their own service. But did organizing by domain even make sense at all? It seemed like a holdover

from an earlier era, when naval and land warfare were wholly separate domains that rarely interacted. Cleaving the military along the lines of domains didn't make sense in the modern world. Today's U.S. military is forever struggling against its own structure by desiring greater jointness. Why not make a military that was joint from the beginning?

This was the genesis of our most radical idea, that our tabula rasa military wouldn't have the services as they currently exist at all. We would organize the military differently - by mission. Looking across numerous DoD strategy documents from several administrations, we identified three overarching missions: defend the homeland, defeat adversaries, and maintain a stabilizing presence abroad. So that would be how our military would be structured. All of the air, naval, land, cyber, and space forces needed to accomplish each mission would be joint from inception.

Once we'd swung an intellectual sledgehammer at the most cherished of all military establishments, the services themselves, then it was easier to get over any squeamishness about taking on other parts of DoD that made little sense to us. We fundamentally changed the combatant commands, changed the personnel structure, and right-sized the senior brass (and senior civilian executives).

Shawn was particularly passionate about restructuring the role of the combatant commands in order to subordinate peacetime military activities to civilian policy aims. Shawn was concerned that today's four-star combatant commanders exert undue influence on U.S. foreign policy, acting as veritable proconsuls. This led to us eliminate the combatant commands as they currently exist. In the revised structure in the article, military forces in peacetime would report up through the State Department's chief of mission authority. Regional activities would be coordinated by a two-star general or flag officer, not a four-star, a major downgrade in status from today.

By the time we were done, we were confident that we had taken the exercise seriously. We hadn't merely made some minor tweaks to today's structure. We had honestly asked ourselves: If you had to start from scratch today, what would you build? And for the life of us, we couldn't envision why anyone would build the structure we have today, which is a product of history.

Foreign Policy took our initial 3,000-word essay and reworked it into a series of infographics with a few hundred words of supporting text. The resulting graphic was far more eye-catching and interesting than anything we'd written. And we were more or less able to capture all of the key ideas and our rationale in the text.

Before publishing, Shawn and I bounced the ideas off of a few close senior mentors. They were essentially aghast at the ideas in the piece and recommended we pull publication. We tried to explain that we weren't *recommending* these changes. Of course, there was no way to actually do much of this. It wouldn't be practical. It was a thought experiment. *What if?*

But if it wasn't practical, then why write the article? The thought experiment was valuable, we argued, because it helped expand the envelope for how people thought about what kinds of changes might be possible in the Defense Department. The Pentagon is

where change goes to die. The DoD is hardly a nimble and fast-moving organization. In our time working in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Shawn and I had both seen DoD struggle to adopt new, innovative organizational changes, like specialized Army units for training and advising foreign partners. We'd seen how slow change can take, if it ever happens at all. (The Army finally created the first specialized training and advising unit in 2017, 16 years after the Afghanistan War began.)

Shawn passionately believed that the role of think tanks was to take intellectual risks and explore ideas that were too radical for people inside government bureaucracies to express. We'd both experienced the reality that when in government, some ideas were simply too controversial to even broach. Shawn's view was that there were very few defense think tank positions, and if we had the good fortune to sit in one of those roles, then we had the responsibility to make the best use of it. It was our *job* to express ideas that made people uncomfortable – and made people think. Others argued that publishing the piece would be damaging to our careers, but Shawn and I both believed that our jobs were to push the bounds of what was seen as possible. When Shawn and I saw the galleys of the *FP* article, I laughed at the X marks through the service emblems. (That had been *FP's* idea, not ours.) That wasn't going to win us any friends, but at least they weren't red X's, I thought. My only hope was that people would at least read the ideas and give some thought to how DoD might be structured differently, even if they didn't agree with us.

Never – before or since – have I gotten such hate mail. *And* such enthusiastic endorsements. The piece came out and Shawn and I got a torrent of responses. Every single one was either effusive praise or visceral criticism. Nothing in between. Shawn and I were invited to give a talk at the Pentagon on the article (which was surprisingly well attended), and similarly, in person, people either loved it or hated it.

I was surprised by the emotional tenor of the responses we got from people, both positive and negative. Over time, I concluded that the reactions said more about how people thought about change in DoD than any particular idea in the article. Some people were hungry for change and were thrilled that we'd kicked open the door on new ideas. Even if they didn't agree with the specific ideas we outlined, our opening gave them the space to argue for changes that inevitably seemed modest by comparison. By expanding the aperture of what was talked about, we gave them freedom to raise new, innovative suggestions.

Others reacted as though the article was almost a personal affront to them. Often, they were reacting to the fact that the military we outlined lacked their service. (It didn't have *any* services, I would point out, usually to no avail.) "What about esprit de corps?" They would ask. "What about the history? The heritage?" Blank sheet, I would say. There is no history. You can create new esprit de corps. These are *created identities*. But to some, DoD's conservatism in embracing change was an anchor, not an albatross.

Shawn wasn't fazed by any of the reactions. He welcomed the discussion that we generated. Shawn wasn't a pot-stirrer, but he never shied away from controversial ideas if he believed in them. It wasn't the first time Shawn had published a controversial article

and gotten heat for it. I never saw him much bothered by criticism, if he believed he was doing the right thing. At the same time, Shawn was willing to admit it if he got something wrong and wasn't afraid to learn. More than anything, he believed in the value of robust dialogue and debate.

Shawn was right. We were right to publish the article. The sky didn't fall. We weren't fired from our jobs or tarred and feathered in the streets. Some folks liked it and others didn't. Many people told us they liked some ideas, such as the changes to the personnel system, and found other ideas loony, such as the organizational changes in the article. Despite our best efforts and numerous caveats throughout the article explaining the premise, many readers inevitably read the piece as a series of recommendations for changes to make today. That wasn't what we meant, but the article was valuable anyway. It sparked a conversation that was - and remains today - vitally important for the Defense Department. Why does it have to be this way? What if it could be different? How could things be better? Shawn believed in the power of ideas and the importance of making space to explore new possibilities.



Paul Scharre is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Technology and National Security Program at CNAS.



*Enabling Decision:
Shaping the National Security
Council for the Next President*

DAFNA H. RAND

Working with Shawn on a report often meant achieving a product based on years of continuous conversations. Shawn's methods included refining his perspective on a given topic by engaging multiple individuals who could analyze the same problem from different angles. And so it was with the topic of National Security Council (NSC) reform. For years, Shawn probed this question, analyzing the institution's staffing, operations, and purview – with the idealistic goal of enhancing U.S. national security decisionmaking.

For Shawn, like me, the importance of the topic was personal. Before arriving at the Center for a New American Security, he had served with distinction on the NSC during President Barack Obama's first term. At the NSC, Shawn had been involved in one of the most consequential use-of-force decisions made during the president's eight years – the 2011 decision to use military force in Libya. At the NSC, Shawn coordinated experts and managed officials from across the U.S. government. He was particularly excited by the opportunity to work on defense policy and strategy with budget experts at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), who sat right downstairs. Indeed, Shawn would often use his vast network to forge closer collaborations among the different NSC directorates, breaking down stovepipes between functional experts (focused on counterterrorism, intelligence, defense, and economic issues) and regional experts working on the Middle East, Asia, etc.

And that is how we met. In the hallways of the NSC, our discussions about the Libya decision and other topics persisted. Over the years, we brainstormed how to bring more strategic thinking and analysis – the “think tank spirit” – to the NSC, an institution that we had proudly served. Ever the entrepreneur, Shawn had new ideas to improve the process and the product, from enhancing the memo drafting approach to convening meetings and disseminating information in new ways.

These conversations became the impetus for our 2015 CNAS report, “Enabling Decision: Shaping the National Security Council for the Next President,” written with Julianne Smith and Jacob Stokes. Shawn began this project eager to research how previous presidents and national security advisors (NSAs) had organized their teams, from McGeorge Bundy (President John F. Kennedy's NSA) to Henry Kissinger. Shawn urged us to consider the impact of new types of information and social media in the 21st century on decisionmaking; the NSC no longer was a rarefied, elite decisionmaking body but had become a nerve center, responding in real time to an overflow of information coming from internal sources, news feeds, and social media. Shawn worried that this shift toward information overload might sideline strategic thinking and planning.

Having arrived at the NSC from the Department of Defense, Shawn was also interested in the role of the NSC vis-à-vis the other national security agencies. Our report advocated for more clearly demarcated domains to ensure that the NSC did not duplicate the work or challenge the authority of senior officials at the Department of Defense, Department of State, or other agencies.

Shawn brought to our report his trademark “futuristic” sensibilities. He pushed us to consider how the NSC staff could incorporate future trends into their thinking, including the role of technology in national security. Finally, Shawn thought deeply about the

professional development of NSC staff. In particular, he was keen that all NSC directors and senior directors master the U.S. government budget so strategic policy planning would more directly inform OMB's international security budgeting process.

Shawn's interest in NSC reform came from his idealistic spirit. He had been honored to serve Obama and the National Security Council and believed deeply in the institution's mission. At the NSC, Shawn had forged close friendships and believed in each of these individuals' capacities and contributions to policy. And Shawn never lost his sense of awe regarding the weight of U.S. national security decisions. A champion of U.S. global leadership, Shawn understood that however small the decision facing the National Security Council, it would likely reverberate around the world. Indeed, Shawn's enthusiasm for the subject of NSC reform reflected his overall approach to the national security field – he brought a special combination of energy that fused ambition, entrepreneurship, and idealism. In pushing for this report, Shawn combined his respect for the NSC's current and future potential with the practical hope, and indeed expectation, that our cohort would be once again returning to lead this institution in the near future.

Dr. Dafna H. Rand is Vice President for Policy and Research at Mercy Corps. She is a former Deputy Director of Studies and Leon Panetta Fellow at CNAS.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

September 14, 2012

Mr. Shawn Brimley
National Security Staff
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20504

Dear Shawn:

I extend to you my sincere thanks for your valuable service on the National Security Staff.

The institution of the Presidency is larger than any one person, and I am proud of the dedicated staff who serve our Nation each day and help me faithfully execute the duties of this Office. As a Director for Strategic Planning, you contributed to a number of important issues, from our efforts on Libya, to the crafting of a new U.S. defense strategy after a decade of war, to our efforts to rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region. You worked in one of our Nation's most demanding environments with impressive skill, and I appreciate your service.

Please accept my best wishes to you and your family, and thank you again for your service on my national security team.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be Barack Obama's signature, written in a cursive style.

*Shawn Brimley and the
'Building the Future Force'
Report*

DR. JERRY HENDRIX

Shawn Brimley was just plain interesting to work with. We had served together in the Office of the Secretary of Defense's Policy office for a brief period in the 2009-2010 time frame. We had continued to correspond even after I had left policy and he had moved over to the White House. By 2013 he had left government and returned to the Center for a New American Security to become its new executive vice president and director of studies. He had reached out to me to ask if I would be interested in publishing a report as part of a new Disruptive Thinkers series. I decided to take him up on his offer and authored a piece questioning the continued relevance of the supercarrier in future war scenarios. Later, in 2014, when I had decided to retire from active duty, I reached out to Shawn to discuss the potential of working in a think tank after retirement. While it was not a direct approach to work at CNAS, his response made it very clear that he was interested in pursuing that potential even as he advised me about engaging the broader think tank community. Of course, in the end I did decide to take him up on his offer, and in the fall of 2014 I became a senior fellow and the director of the defense program at CNAS.

At first, I worked down the hall from Shawn, literally in the middle of the organization. However, when the opportunity presented itself, I moved into a recently vacated office next to his. It was a good move. It gave me the opportunity to hop next door and to sit and talk with him from time to time, which was both fun and informative. Shawn was an innovator, both in thought and in action. He was just coming off publishing a series of reports that looked both at the future of warfare and technology as well as structural innovations in the way our government organized itself. He was in his intellectual prime, but he was also deeply engaged in the expansion of CNAS and the mentoring of both peers and juniors throughout the institution. I talked with him on numerous occasions about the importance of his writing more. He was such a font of ideas and yet his day-to-day administrative duties, helping to run the Center as well as reading and editing the numerous reports and papers being generated from within it, distracted him from his own production. I more than once jokingly suggested that we swap places, that he spend more time writing and I, the older retired Navy captain, spend more time administering, and he would laugh. We always thought that there would be more time for Shawn to get his ideas down on paper.

During the summer of 2017 we happened upon the idea of organizing a new advisory body within CNAS. The idea was to get innovative thinkers from both industry and the intellectual community to sit down together and consider what Shawn and I described as the blank whiteboard force. This force was premised from the oft-cited phrase that if we could build the nation's military from scratch today, based upon the new technologies we have, it would look nothing like the force we currently field. Our hope was to convene a panel that would look at the "future force" that lay beyond the programmed military we have today. We batted around a range of names and ideas to consider and the Future Force Advisory Council was thus born in Shawn's office.

We convened our first meeting discussing theater-level strategy and future concepts of operation and made predictions about what the future force could encounter that may be missing from current forecasts. There were thought leaders and technologists in the

room and Shawn contributed throughout. Our next meeting dove deep into the megatrends that were underlying and shaping the global environment. Later meetings looked into key technologies and the defense budget. However, the first meeting provided the central organizing question for our “Building the Future Force” paper: What do you do about mobile weapons launch platforms? Shawn, our colleague Paul Scharre, and I became deeply interested in this challenge as a topic to write around. Paul’s calendar was already committed with writing projects, so the writing fell to Shawn and me.

Shortly thereafter Shawn and I sat in his office and began to discuss the rough outline of the project. Personally, I was excited. Shawn and I had not worked closely together on a project since we had both been in OSD Policy examining the Pacific force posture laydown in late 2009, and even then, the project didn’t involve much writing. This was going to be a chance to do some significant writing with Shawn. We quickly outlined the structure of the paper to include an introduction and then three major subsections dealing with the challenge of finding, fixing, and then ultimately destroying a mobile target. The paper would end with a conclusion that would wrap up the major themes developed.

Then Shawn added the final ingredient: “Let’s write with the RAs.”

He was, of course, referring to the three research associates who work in our defense program. Alex Velez-Green, Lauren Fish, and Adam Routh make up the powerful research stable for the Defense Strategies and Assessments Program at CNAS. All three are known for their strong work ethic and mature analytical skills. They had all done some writing on their own or with others on previous major reports, but never had they been given the chance to work together with Shawn and me on a major project. For those who knew Shawn, this was exactly the type of thing he liked to do. It was the type of project he had pursued when he was a young research assistant working at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and I could tell he was going to take a special pleasure in working with members of the CNAS bullpen one more time.

I should point out that I knew by then, even if everyone else did not, that Shawn was planning on departing CNAS near the end of the year. One common joking complaint about Shawn that forever followed him around was his inclination to “overshare.” And so it was that as we began working on the “Building the Future Force” report, we both knew this would be Shawn’s last report at the Center for a New American Security, an institution he had helped begin just 10 years prior. Thus, it was all too fitting and appropriate for Shawn, who had begun his think tank career as a research assistant. When he returned to CNAS as its director of studies after his time in government, it was clear he intended to make it a place that focused on future leaders, and so it was natural that he would end his time as its executive vice president helping new RAs build their brand in the greater Washington analytical community.

We decided to divide up the paper among the five of us. I would lead off the effort and write the introductory section. We would ask each RA to write one of the middle three sections that focused on finding, fixing, and destroying mobile targets. Shawn was to pull it all together within the conclusion. To keep the paper from becoming too large and

intellectually unwieldy, Shawn established target word counts for each section: 1,000 words for the introduction and conclusion and 1,500 words for each of the three middle sections. “We need to keep it readable,” he advised me in a none-too-subtle nod toward the 18,000-word bomber study I had recently authored with one of our visiting military fellows. Shawn had been the initial editor of that paper as director of studies, and I knew he didn’t want to have to spend as much time on this effort as he had with that one. Shawn, as a former senior policymaker, understood that leaders didn’t have the time to read every report deeply. He wanted to ensure that they would be able to grasp the important assertions of this paper quickly and clearly.

I looked forward to establishing the initial “voice” of the paper, setting its common theme and direction in the introduction. I chose to first highlight previous efforts that had successfully sought to look outward toward an ill-defined future before turning toward establishing the framework for the three body sections to come. I selected Navy Admiral Arleigh Burke’s Task Force 70 effort and longtime Office of Net Assessment Director Andrew W. Marshall’s predictions regarding the demise of the Soviet Union. Lastly, I added in Shawn and Robert Work’s early 2014 effort, “20YY: Preparing for War in the Robotic Age,” which, although it had not yet come true, I thought was a superb example of solid future forecasting. I then wrote two paragraphs that attempted to frame the overarching questions of the paper: what type of future was most likely, what were the underlying technology trends, what were the challenges in the areas of concepts of operations. When I was finished, I sent the draft introduction to Shawn. It was a couple of days before he asked me to come into his office. “Hendrix,” he said, “I can either be an author on this paper, or one of its subjects, but I cannot be both,” and with that he edited out the section dealing with “20YY.” I put it back in, but attempted to tone it down. I decided we could fight about it again later. In the end, I won that particular battle, but cancer didn’t exactly make it a fair fight.

So, the Defense Strategies and Assessments team got busy on the rest of the paper. Alex, who was beginning to make a name for himself in the nuclear deterrence arena, took the first section, dealing with “The future of anti-access, area denial.” This section would establish the future security environment, the types of sensor and combat systems the United States will face, and provide the context for the subsequent sections. Adam, a former Army Ranger who was entrenching himself into research regarding the growing military and economic competition in space, focused on the middle section, “Finding and fixing moving needles in a shifting haystack.” This section sought to raise the reader’s understanding of the characteristics of movement, time, and concealment and the challenge they posed to surveillance systems as well as traditional rules of engagement. Finally, Lauren, who had come to our team after a tour as a staff research aide on the Senate side of Capitol Hill, weighed in on the topic of “Shortening the interval between target acquisition and kill.” To be clear, they each had other roles to play, as they continued to support CNAS senior fellows in their research, but each worked assiduously on his or her section. By early September, the drafts of their sections were ready for initial review by Shawn and me.

In mid-September, Shawn sent an email: “my one request for the next round of revisions is for folks to pay special attention to the connective tissue between the various

sections. Let's make sure that these sections make sense together. I suggest we do another round of revisions." And so, we did. Shawn's concerns addressed the fact that the paper at this point in its development was unbalanced and represented a number of solo "voices" rather than a coherent chorus. The first thing I did was to go over the paper and make substantive edits to ensure that the sections were balanced in their presentation and argument. It wouldn't do for one section to be deep, another to be wide and a third to be both deep and wide. Then Adam, Alex, Lauren, and I decided to do an overall revision of the paper, and then Adam and Lauren "volunteered" Alex, in recognition of his solid writing skills, to do an overall scrub of the paper in order to present its arguments in one harmonious presentation. Shawn was kept apprised of these efforts throughout. By the end of September, we had something to show him, and he then very quickly produced the paper's conclusions.

For those who knew Shawn, it is easy to visualize him sitting down in some coffee shop with his laptop and very quickly generating the 1,500 words that comprise the conclusion of the "Building the Future Force" report. For someone like me, for whom writing represents some excruciating act of creation, Shawn's ability to focus in a noisy environment and then just produce a coherent argument was a source of both marvel and jealousy. I would like to imagine that some of our conversations in his office on the topic helped to guide him in his effort, but in reality, he probably just sat down and the words for the "Looking Ahead" section just came to him. I think it's essential to say that Shawn's work was important to him. Outside of his family, he thought ideas were the essence of life.

For his conclusion, Shawn returned to themes that he had previously covered over the past decade. He led off with a strong endorsement for the Department of Defense's investment in innovation and new technologies. "The department's commitment to regaining technological superiority is a critical first step toward fielding the future force that America needs," he wrote, but he then went on to discuss the restrictions imposed upon investment by the constrained budgetary environment as well as the uncomfortable fact that many of the most innovative actors within the U.S. economy are unwilling to partner with DoD due to the inherent regulatory restrictions that accompany such relationships. However, in the end, Shawn presented an optimistic view of the future, wherein U.S. advantages in its innovative culture and free-market system far outweighed its restrictions. Looking back to past examples of future planning, Shawn saw a clear path to a certain future: "Confronted with profound technological uncertainties, cast against a shifting and tenuous geopolitical backdrop, [previous future planners] were charged with imagining a way to protect or reassert America's global military pre-eminence. In each case, they succeeded by looking past the emergencies of the day and grappling directly with the trends they knew to be reshaping the character of warfare beneath the surface." And then Shawn issued a dare to the future: "The pace of technological improvement, coupled with intensifying challenges to U.S. national security interests worldwide, demands that the United States dare to imagine ways of fighting that may defy conventional wisdom but that harness America's unique advantages."

This is the essence of Shawn Brimley that I choose to keep with me, a “dare to imagine ways of fighting that may defy conventional wisdom.” Perhaps that was why he hired me three years ago, to imagine alternatives.

When he and I last spoke, two days before he passed away, I reminded him that we had this one last paper yet to publish. He seemed somewhat surprised. I am sure that in all the turmoil of receiving his diagnosis, fighting his way through his treatments, and spending time with his family and friends as his prognosis became clear, this last paper had slipped his mind, but I think it all too appropriate that Shawn Brimley’s last contribution to our national security dialogue should be written in collaboration with three members of the upcoming generation of analysts and policymakers and on a topic he cared so much about, “The Future Force.” To be sure, it was our privilege to work with him.



Dr. Jerry Hendrix is Vice President at the Telemus Group and previously was a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Defense Strategies and Assessments Program at CNAS.

*Shawn Brimley's
Greatest Professional Legacy:
Creating an Environment
Where So Many Others
Could Thrive Intellectually*

ILAN GOLDENBERG

Shawn Brimley had an impressive track record of writing and intellectual contributions to the national security debate, ranging from his work on the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review to his contributions to the third offset strategy and his important role in the Iraq debates of 2007 and 2008, which set the agenda early in the Obama administration. But his greatest professional contribution was through his leadership, wisdom, and creativity creating an environment in which so many others could thrive at the Center for a New American Security. Indeed, every report, op-ed, or piece of intellectual content that CNAS produces now and forever will have Shawn's stamp on it. Because without him CNAS would not exist and would not be what it is today.

CNAS is a special place. It is that rare institution that people absolutely love working at and that also punches way above its weight. Despite having one-tenth the budget and staff of the bigger think tanks in Washington, it consistently gets mentioned in the same breath with the big boys: Brookings, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and others. Many people deserve credit for CNAS' success: Michèle Flournoy, Richard Fontaine, Kurt Campbell, Nate Fick, John Nagl, Bob Work, and many more. But at its heart Shawn Brimley is the person who built this place and put his indelible stamp on it. The personality of the institution reflects Shawn's more than it does anyone else's, and the personality of the institution is what makes CNAS so special. Shawn's life may have been unfairly short, but people who live longer will not have the kind of lasting intellectual impact that he had by building this institution.

What makes this place so special? It starts with the people. And who brought so many of these people to CNAS and put us all together? Shawn. Loren DeJonge Schulman, Paul Scharre, Jerry Hendrix, Susanna Blume, Julie Smith, myself, and so many others. Nearly every single hire of a senior researcher that CNAS has made in the past five years has been driven by Shawn. He would identify people who he thought were super smart and could knock it out of the park, but were also fun, good, kind people. And then he would quietly work behind the scenes to make sure that his favorite candidate would end up with the job. When you were talking to him about future hires (including getting hired yourself) it felt like you were part of a special conspiracy and plan to bring the most awesome people to CNAS. And it was easy for him to recruit these incredible people because people loved him. They loved who he was, they trusted him, enjoyed being with him, and wanted to work with him. He really loved this part of the job. And he understood that it was the most important thing about building an institution. And especially in the last couple of years of his life as CNAS went into another gear, you could see how proud he was of his work and what he had done to bring us all together.

But it wasn't just bringing the people together. He then created the environment where we could all thrive and work together. The director of studies role at think tanks is the person responsible for quality control over the institution's intellectual content. If you end up with the wrong director of studies you have someone who gets in everybody's business and micromanages their writing and work. When that happens it is a miserable experience for everyone and it also really hurts the productivity of an institution, slows everything down, and causes talent to flee. Part of the reason CNAS punches so far above its weight is that Shawn was the opposite of that. We thrived because his attitude

was that he would hire the best and then enable them to succeed. That doesn't mean he wouldn't intervene when there was a problem. And he was always enthusiastic and helpful in guiding your research and brainstorming with you about how to have maximum impact with your work. But he trusted people and knew how to create the environment that got the most out of them. And his philosophy was ultimately that if CNAS is going to hire the best, it must then trust them to execute on their work.

Shawn was also critical to one of CNAS' most important missions: building the next generation of foreign policy leaders. CNAS is special and different from many of the other think tanks in Washington in that it encourages and even expects staff who are early in their careers, including research associates and interns, to publish, speak publicly, and find their voice. Shawn did not just preach this ethos; he lived it. He was constantly talking to junior staff and giving them advice about what to read, what to write about, how to think about their career. To be honest, I noticed this less as a mentee than as a peer. But when he died and tributes from colleagues started going up on Facebook, Twitter, and elsewhere, one word came up again and again from every young person who was touched by Shawn and now was feeling the loss. MENTOR. The reality is that he was a mentor to all of us, but especially to those earliest in their career who needed it most.

And then, of course, there was Shawn's wisdom. Everybody came into his office with a problem and he would talk with them, listen, and always have brilliant solutions. He was the therapist/Mr. Fix-It of the organization. But this could only work because he was also a role model for so many of us, from the most junior staff to the most senior, in how to live your life. So people trusted him with all kinds of problems.

This wisdom extended far beyond helping with the usual work problem. You could talk to him about anything and he just had an innate nature for putting things in perspective and understanding what was important. The day I found out he was sick, I wrote to him that he was the wisest person I've ever known, and I meant that. There is no one else who I trusted more to give me good advice. That advice ranged from how to deal with a particular management problem; to how to think about scoping out a big report; to how to ensure the people who worked for me were getting the right professional development opportunities; or, at a personal level, to dealing with family challenges and ethical dilemmas. When a few months ago I had a difficult decision to make in my personal life, the first person (outside of my wife) who I talked to about it was Shawn because I knew he would have special insight and I trusted him. And this level of trust in Shawn was not unusual. So many of us came to him with our most challenging problems.

You saw this wisdom with how he dealt with his own illness. The honest and beautiful post on Facebook sharing the news. The hilarious pictures from the movie *Alien* of a monster popping out of its victim's abdomen that he shared on Facebook right before going into surgery. The beautiful and heartbreaking note he wrote to his friends and loved ones only days before he died. And the short five minutes I was lucky enough to have on the phone with him two days before he passed. You could see his wisdom and grace in all of it.

And beyond all the incredible things he did to make CNAS what it was, on a personal note he was just a wonderful person and friend. One of the things I loved most about Shawn was his openness and willingness to share. One of my favorite memories with him was the first week I came back from paternity leave after Anna, my oldest daughter, was born. He and I had lunch and he told me that he and Marjorie were expecting Claire. Of course, Marjorie was only two weeks pregnant and Shawn was under orders to not tell me or anyone else that! But Shawn couldn't keep a secret. I was really glad he told me. We had a great conversation. Two guys just starting to wrap our heads around what it means to be fathers and beginning that incredible journey.

Shawn's impact on CNAS and on the intellectual growth and development of so many people is immeasurable and in my view, it is his greatest professional contribution to our field. On a personal note, he did so much to help me with my own career and he was a great person and friend. I miss him dearly.



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Agenda SecDef

LOREN DEJONGE SCHULMAN

In the fall of 2015, just a few months after I'd joined the Center for a New American Security, Shawn Brimley pitched me on launching the "Agenda SecDef" column at War on the Rocks. It was less a pitch than a gentle prod: I was new to the think tank business and completely terrified of putting my name on any set of words that might offend someone, somewhere. Shawn was persuasive: "you and I think more about what the next secretary of defense should do with their tenure than almost anyone in town - this is territory we should own." My hands were shaking when I typed our first draft. Though he never said so, I am positive he had an alternative agenda: getting me out of my well-honed shell.

Regardless, it worked. Together, we wrote and launched a new series aimed at preparing the next secretary of defense and his or her team, publishing our opening gambit on November 24, 2015, with this hook:

"The next SecDef will ... assume management of one of the largest organizations in the world. The Department of Defense (DoD) employs nearly 3 million uniformed and civilian personnel; spends more than \$600 billion a year; contains dozens of huge organizations like the military services and regional combatant commands; and sustains a massive logistics architecture and a global network of military bases - all of which enable the use of American military power. A new SecDef will simultaneously assume responsibility for managing a \$50-billion healthcare system, preparing for contingencies ranging from natural disasters to cyber attacks to conventional war, and signing the orders to send men and women in uniform into harm's way. No preparation will ever be adequate, but preparation is key nonetheless."

Shawn forced me to be less idealistic in my expectations and to use fewer semicolons; I edited out his sprinklings of "nevertheless" and strategy cliches. Altogether, we wrote nine essays before the November 2016 election.

To say that we felt passionately about these admittedly insidious missives is an understatement. We had both served in the Pentagon in distinct but complementary roles and keenly felt that nudging, shoving, and kicking the direction of the Department of Defense was a job demanding intensive dedication and energy. In a town that uses "strategy" as a verbal pause, Shawn demanded excellence in strategic thought and application. He believed with all his heart that the exercise of strategy was not just a piece of paper and had to work for the secretary, the men and women of the armed forces, and the president. He wrote: "he or she has unique responsibility and convening power to force debates within and across ends, ways, and means that the bureaucracy may be incentivized or too exhausted to do more than gloss over." He went beyond the usual call for action to offer a series of practical and thoughtful steps to inform strategy development, to improve the strategic planning process, to strengthen the strategic dialogue between the department and the Congress, and to make the strategy real in resourcing and action. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of the oaths sworn on taking office. "The nation deserves better," Shawn wrote in his final piece.

Setting aside the substantive utility of this series, these essays were a bit like playing house – designing and trying on a series of ideas and instructions for an imaginary senior leader we were building from scratch. It’s rare that Cabinet officials are given time to prepare adequately for the most complex jobs on the planet. Allowing them to go in blind felt, to Shawn, both unfair and unnecessary. While a million think pieces would be drafted on the substance of what the next administration should consider in terms of defense strategy, few were prepared to consider the how. The best agenda on the planet, we believed, “must be paired with an understanding of the levers that move the Pentagon and the critical players within it. If [the next SecDef] fails to do so, they will quickly be overwhelmed, losing the ability to shape the priorities of the department from the start. Instead, he or she will simply become a passenger in a river of process, memos, bilateral meetings with counterparts, travel, and endless trips to the White House.”

Due to this obsession with defense governance as well as strategy, we, with many others, were asked to support a few quieter special projects going into the 2016 election, preparing policy papers, engagement strategies, and management techniques for a to-be-named secretary of defense. Here was a chance to take the fantasy Pentagon we’d constructed and test it out in the real world. If you’ve not gotten to watch a friend take on a project they were born for, find the chance someday. Shawn approached these tasks with a combination of seriousness and giddiness that was a joy to behold (even as I kept editing out his wordy transitions). He was alight with a sense of mission, whether drafting a pointed paragraph on the values a new SecDef should bring to the job or building a binder to house the stacks of plans and spreadsheets and memos he’d put together.

Shawn wrote much of this content for others to sign their names to, but in the words he drafted you can easily see the leader he both aspired to be and desired in others:

I will ensure that my decision-making processes have ample opportunity for critical feedback. I will listen closely to and value your advice and will respond with my early, and direct feedback and decisions whenever possible. . . . I expect leaders to lead by example, set clear expectations of professionalism, and ask for feedback at all levels. I will set clear and meaningful targets on what success looks like for our priorities, engage regularly to enable success and remove barriers to these initiatives, and transparently hold myself and others accountable when we fail. Collectively, we must all strive for the highest level of integrity, ethics, and professionalism that our vital missions require. . . . It is essential that civilian leaders control our nation’s military power. It is essential that those trained and prepared to wage war on our behalf provide professional military advice at every level. These two principles are not, and must not, be in perceived or actual opposition.

At the same time, Shawn was predicting a post-election future in which he’d be called back into the Pentagon and the long hours and interrupted evenings and weekends that went with it. Like many of us with young families, he worried about the necessary time away from his kids, about how to manage a balanced partnership with his wife, Marjorie, about finances in a public sector salary. Rather than accepting these professional demands as necessary evils, on top of everything else Shawn made time to develop principles he and others would want to bring back to government for a healthier workplace.

Though neither the election nor his career took the path he anticipated, Shawn's ideals and ideas developed that year trickled out and up to audiences who valued them using a variety of routes. Some of the prep work we produced in 2016 was quietly shared with new audiences, and, though momentarily squelched, we drafted several more essays aimed at Secretary of Defense James Mattis's tenure. In his first draft, he wrote "we are re-booting "Agenda SecDef" with a clear of purpose in mind - to provide Secretary Mattis with what we believe are good, durable ideas that can help steer the Pentagon through the many complex waters he must navigate." These pieces were not widely read, but Shawn was assured they were read by the right audiences - rumint frequently made its way to us that our ideas had were sitting on the right desks and making the right people very, very annoyed.

When we first worked together years ago, Shawn and I frequently spoke of how concepts and phrases seeded themselves in the defense debate and grew to have significant influence in the direction of the largest body of government. Today, I frequently see little crumbs that indicate "Shawn was here" - in speeches, legislation, op-eds, investments, and much more. Shawn will not lean on the desk of a future secretary of defense arguing passionately for a more profound emphasis on warfighting prowess, or modeling a robust civil-military relationship. But whether they know it or not, many future SecDefs will be advised by his ideas and ideals, they'll be held to standards Shawn articulated so well, and they'll challenged by overseers who expected them to prepare for this role as well as Shawn did.



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The Legacy of Shawn Brimley

THE HONORABLE MICHÈLE FLOURNOY

Shawn Brimley's thought leadership on defense and national security issues is well-documented in this volume. From shaping U.S. national security and defense strategy, to recommending improvements to the interagency process, to helping to conceive of the so-called third offset strategy to maintain the U.S. military-technological edge in the face of renewed great-power competition, Shawn made many substantial contributions to U.S. policy over the last decade.

But behind the scenes, Shawn made equally, if not more, significant contributions to the field as an organizational entrepreneur and as a remarkable mentor and promoter of the next generation of national security leaders. He loved to grow both institutions and people, and he was remarkably good at both.

I first met Shawn in 2005, when I hired him to be my research assistant at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He quickly evolved from being my researcher to a co-author and intellectual partner as we published numerous articles and reports on topics ranging from a five-year assessment of the war on terrorism to best practices in strategy development. In 2007, when Kurt Campbell and I decided to start a new think tank, the Center for a New American Security, Shawn was the first person we hired. He became the first fellow in the organization, developing and executing our initial research projects and reports. In early 2009, when I was asked to join the Obama administration as the under secretary of defense for policy, I brought Shawn with me to the Pentagon, where he started as a special assistant, then moved to be a core member of the Strategy office, and then later became a director on the National Security Council staff. When Shawn returned to CNAS in late 2012, he became the executive vice president and director of studies, where he led the research staff and programs of the Center. And in late 2017, just before he died, Shawn became a founding partner of WestExec Advisors, a new strategic advisory firm that he helped to conceive and launch.

Organizational Entrepreneurship

Shawn was the consummate organizational entrepreneur. In every organization in which he served, he always sought to make it better. He was not afraid to depart from inherited ways of doing business to try something new and different. He was an innovator at heart, and any organization in which he served became his incubator.

Nowhere was this more apparent than at CNAS. In his first tour at the Center, Shawn was deeply engaged with the leadership team in defining the organization's unique mission and culture. Shawn spent hours refining our mission statement to ensure that we captured a differentiated vision for a new kind of national security think tank in Washington: one that was both principled and pragmatic, bipartisan in its staff and nonpartisan in its work; a think tank that would make developing the next generation of national security leaders an explicit and central part of its mission; a research team that was not afraid to take risk and "go to the pain" to work on the issues most consequential to U.S. national security, even if they were fraught with controversy.

He also played a critical role in translating this mission statement into a unique and vibrant organizational culture. At CNAS, researchers were encouraged to drive their own

independent research agendas rather than being directed to undertake projects based on the preferences of funders. The youngest staff members were given bylines on the reports on which they worked and were encouraged to write and publish under the CNAS moniker. Senior staff understood that one of their most important responsibilities was to mentor the junior staff. In addition, innovation was encouraged and expected. And most importantly, CNAS put its people first – whether it was investing in their professional development or supporting an intern as he went through treatment for a brain tumor or building the sense of team through staff rides, celebrations, and social events.

When Shawn returned to CNAS as director of studies, he took his organizational entrepreneurship to the next level. He grew the research staff from a handful of scholars to the team of 40 full-time staff members, 10 interns, five visiting fellows, and around 40 adjunct fellows it is today while increasing its diversity. He expanded CNAS research into new areas beyond our bread and butter defense program, recruiting Phil Carter in 2013 to establish the first veterans research program at any policy think tank in the country; bringing in Ben FitzGerald to establish our first technology and national security program; hiring Liz Rosenberg to develop an energy, economics, and security program; empowering Loren Schulman, Julie Smith, and Kate Kidder to launch a new research program on women in national security; and establishing three regional security programs, on Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. At the same time, he encouraged collaboration across programs, taking advantage of CNAS' small size and agility to create multidisciplinary teams to address the toughest cross-cutting issues while also reinforcing a “One Team, One Fight” culture in which we all looked for ways to support one another's success. Shawn simultaneously increased the productivity of the research staff (increasing the number of substantive reports each year, from eight in 2007 to over 40 in 2017); sharpened our focus on having tangible impact on policy and legislation; and helped make the CNAS annual conference into a “must attend” national security event in D.C. As the director of studies, he had a light touch that engaged program directors on the direction of their research agenda and the quality of their reports without making them feel micromanaged.

In partnership with Bob Work and Richard Fontaine, Shawn also helped transform the Center's business model to put it on a much stronger financial footing while maintaining the independence of the Center's research. As a member of the executive team, he supported efforts to professionalize the CNAS back office, building professional teams for publications, development, finance, and operations in order to take us from a perpetually scrappy start-up to a more professional and enduring institution. He also became a skilled fundraiser in his own right, helping to grow the Center's annual revenues as well as create its first reserve fund.

Shawn embraced innovation at every opportunity, pushing us into the world of videos, podcasts, infographics, “tweet storms,” and congressional “boot camps” to heighten the reach and impact of our research. Ever the aesthete, he also championed the expansion and renovation of our physical space to create more collaborative space for the staff and a beautiful, light-filled meeting space for CNAS events.

When our executive team would meet every Monday morning, it was not unusual for us to begin with Shawn saying, “I have an idea. What if we ... ?” And the next CNAS innovation would be born. But beyond having the big idea, Shawn was also masterful in figuring out how to socialize it to gain buy-in and ownership from the staff and then execute it in a way that created a sense of positive change and momentum. He was not afraid to take risk to try something new, and his excitement about venturing into uncharted territory was positively infectious. He was a source of inspiration for others to do the same, making CNAS the powerful incubator for new ideas and approaches that it is today.

Growing the Next Generation of National Security Leaders

From the earliest stage in his career, Shawn understood the importance of mentoring others. When I first hired him as a research assistant, he immediately began mentoring the interns. This is not typical behavior for a 20-something in D.C. who is still trying to chart his own career path. Perhaps it was his time serving in the Canadian Armed Forces before he came to the United States; perhaps, as his father suggested to me, it was the experiences he had while growing up Scouting in Ontario; perhaps it was the values with which he was raised. Whatever the reason, Shawn decided early on that one of the ways he was going to contribute and make a difference in the world was by helping other people to be successful in their lives and their careers. He understood that the name of the game was not necessarily striving for the next brass ring for himself (the primary preoccupation of many in Washington), but rather to create opportunity for his entire peer group, to build a cadre and network of young professionals who would rise in the ranks together and support one another's success.

Shawn was the colleague who would call you to flag a job opportunity that just opened up and encourage you to apply. Shawn was the person who would always drop what he was doing for the impromptu counseling session, whether it was an intern asking how to take the next step professionally or a friend asking how to juggle his career with being a good dad. Shawn was a classic servant-leader who understood that his most important role was helping and enabling the success of others.

When giving a eulogy at his funeral, I asked a congregation of several hundred to raise a hand if Shawn had helped them in some way professionally or personally during his 40 years on this earth. Nearly every hand in the church went up. Shawn Brimley spent only 15 years in the national security field, and yet dozens if not hundreds of people would consider him to be a mentor or someone who guided or helped them at a critical juncture in their lives. Extraordinary. Few people who live twice as long could say the same.

And in many ways, this – more than anything else – is Shawn's most powerful and enduring legacy. He has helped to support and advance many of the people who will rise as national security leaders and shape U.S. policy and debate for decades to come. And he will live on in the contributions they make to a safer and more secure world – and undoubtedly in all of our hearts as well.

Michèle Flournoy is co-founder and managing director of WestExec Advisors. Previously, she served as CEO of CNAS and as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.



