ALL THE CONSIDERATIONS OF this book point ultimately toward the importance of maintaining relative stability in the size, structure, posture, and capabilities of the U.S. Army in the years and decades to come. These conclusions remain true even if the war on terror gradually winds down in the years ahead and even if the Korean conflict, today the most significant military contingency undergirding U.S. Army force planning, is defused or resolved. Similar arguments pertain to the Marine Corps, though that service is less likely to suffer from the wide swings in strategic thought that often affect how the United States builds its Army.

My conclusion can be summarized simply: the United States should maintain roughly a million-soldier Total Army. That is very similar to where the U.S. Army is today, in total size, counting some 500,000 active duty soldiers and 550,000 reservists. It is almost identical to the 975,000-strong force that is envisioned for later in the decade under the 2015 Obama administration’s budget plan—though those numbers could decline to perhaps 900,000 under a possible return to sequestration-like levels of funding. The calculations in this book are not precise enough to lead me to object to the 975,000-strong force, but a Total Army of less than 950,000 would be smaller than I would recommend based on the analyses developed in this book.
The 1+2 mission set that I propose here requires a significant active duty Army. The U.S. Marine Corps is the nation’s expeditionary service, and it has a remarkable military capability. But it is focused on maritime environments and on missions of moderate size and scale, involving at most a few brigades in most cases (say, 20,000 to 30,000 armed personnel). Army airborne and special forces similarly are extraordinarily impressive, and geographically flexible. But they too are modest in size and, for the most part, in armament as well. The National Guard is crucial to the nation’s security posture and plays a central role in the strategy I propose here. But the Army reserve component already represents more than half the nation’s soldiers (and draws quite considerably on the active duty force for its recruiting pool, which raises questions of where the competent soldiers would come from, if the ratio of reservists and Guardsmen to active duty soldiers were to be notably changed). Many of the plausible missions the 1+2 posture is designed to handle could arise quickly or require continuous attentiveness and preparation. They also place a premium on deterrence. It is best to reduce the odds further that any will happen in the first place, which necessitates preparation, so that would-be adversaries realize that the United States has the capacity—and, quite likely, the will—to oppose possible aggressions promptly, before potential invasions abroad create faits accomplis. An active duty U.S. force, consisting in part of forward-deployed units large enough at least to constitute a trip-wire force, and ideally an initial holding force in key theaters, is the most prudent way to be ready for missions that may arise quickly. These U.S. military capabilities, of course, should be developed in association with U.S. allies. But the allies will often not be able to handle the full burden absent American help.

Because of my view that much of this American ground capability should remain in the active duty forces, the implication is that not only the aggregate size but also the individual components of the U.S. Army should remain roughly as they are today as well. In addition, the force structure should remain capable of high-end maneuver warfare in distant regions. In other words, it will still require armor, significant numbers of brigade combat teams and aviation brigades, supporting logistics, and many other existing capabilities. The Army of the future should not be radically different from the Army of today—though of course technological modernizations should be continued and other innovations pursued as well. There is, to be sure, enough uncertainty in these analyses, and
enough room for reasonable debate, that my book cannot definitively disprove the viability of, say, the 420,000-soldier active force that today’s Army says would result from sequestration. I do not favor such a force, largely because it falls towards the lower end of the range of what my calculations would say is acceptable. But it is not fundamentally different from the Army that seems advisable. That said, Active Army postures that dropped below 400,000 would most likely lack adequate capacity for the missions that history and current geopolitics suggest it prudent to prepare for.

Under my overall proposal, Army civilians would number in the ballpark of 225,000, modestly fewer than today. Some reforms and efficiencies would result in a smaller workforce, but the basic responsibilities of the federal civilian workforce would not change radically either.

Two hundred pages later, I have found my way back to defending the status quo in respect to the Army’s size and composition—and suggesting that it be largely sustained well into the future. The force-sizing construct for the Army would shift, however. It would no longer derive from a modified and reduced form of a two-war capability, as it is under the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review. Instead, it would be founded on what I call a 1+2 posture, that is, having the capability to wage one major all-out regional battle while contributing substantially to two multiyear, multilateral operations of different possible character.

Still, there would be more continuity than change in my proposal. There is good reason for that. While the precise level of forces cannot be confidently computed for an Army of 2020 or 2030, broad-brush considerations point to the case for strategic conservatism.

There is a strong case for keeping an Army, and a Marine Corps, with a broad range of capabilities and the overall size and responsiveness needed to undergird a 1+2 force-sizing paradigm. The former missions could include the more demanding of those considered here—not only highly unlikely contingencies involving Russia or China but also possible fights in Korea and the Middle East. The larger operations could also include complex missions; not all would necessarily be wars in the classic sense. But they could be long and dangerous and occur in austere conditions. They would likely involve the participation of American allies and other security partners and international actors. Some such missions could be carried out primarily by non-American personnel. They could well be important enough to U.S. security that American decisionmakers
would find it essential that the United States play a considerable role under certain circumstances.

My specific arguments about the size and capabilities of the U.S. Army flow out of detailed analyses of various scenarios:

—Deterring Russia from even contemplating attacks on the Baltic states or China from considering an unfriendly future role on the Korean Peninsula,

—Handling an asymmetric threat in the South China Sea by constructing and protecting a number of bases in the Philippines and elsewhere,

—Helping South Asia cope with a shaky cease-fire after a potentially nuclear war between India and Pakistan or handle the aftermath of a major and complex humanitarian disaster superimposed on a security crisis,

—Deterring Iran from use of weapons of mass destruction, with the implied prospect of an in extremis ground invasion capability,

—Restoring order in a place like Saudi Arabia or Syria,

—Coping with a severe Ebola outbreak or the equivalent not in the small states of West Africa but in Nigeria at the same time that that country falls further into violence, or

—Handling a further meltdown in law and order in Central America that could result in much more direct threats to the American people—these are the scenarios I have considered in this book. By way of reference to the 1+2 posture, some operations would be closer to the “1” larger war, others closer to the “2” multilateral missions of a different sort. They are, one hopes, all individually unlikely, but they are meant to be plausible, and stressful tests of any proposed American military force posture. They strike me as likely to be representative of the kinds of threats that the next decades of the twenty-first century could present.

The logic behind the individual scenarios grows out of a broader perspective on the character of today’s world, and America’s role within it. The planet today is far more peaceful and stable than in most of human history, and while nuclear deterrence and globalization and other such factors probably play a role in achieving that, the U.S.-led international order undoubtedly does as well. Yet it is a fragile peace in places—in Central Europe as well as in the western Pacific. It is a world in open conflict in other places, most notably the broader Middle East, including some of South Asia, and much of northern and Central Africa. Serious criminality is found in many of these places too, as well as in large parts
of Latin America, an otherwise promising region but one still very much weighed down by widespread violence. Nuclear proliferation remains an acute worry in regard to Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan.

New twenty-first-century dangers abound as well. They include advanced biological pathogens, changes in weather and climate (and with them, changed rainfall patterns and storms, as well as drought), and the sheer demands on the planet’s environment and infrastructure brought on by a human population that could reach 10 billion sometime this century. While the major industrial nations do not appear on the verge of running out of key raw materials anytime soon, there are enough resources under stress, especially the ocean fisheries and tropical forests, and enough valuable resources that could entice greedy actors into conflict in places like Central Asia, the broader Middle East, and southern Africa, that natural resource issues could contribute to conflict as well. In some cases, conflicts could have an aura of “back to the future.” In others, they could produce a uniquely modern witches’ brew of multiple causes exacerbated by the demographic, economic, technological, and meteorological trends of the twenty-first century.

On balance, the world is moving in a direction compatible with American interests and indeed with universal values of human rights and dignity and freedom and greater prosperity. Never has there been so much progress in such a short space of time than in recent decades. Because far larger populations exist on the planet today than ever before, this reality translates into enormous improvement in the human condition. But the rate of change is inherently destabilizing too, in many places, and the progress is quite fragile in much of the world.

America’s grand strategy is working. The Army and Marine Corps are crucial elements in that strategy, for deterring conflict, partnering with allies and others abroad, resolving conflicts when necessary, and helping keep the peace in general. But their work, and that of the nation, is far from done. We would be tempting fate and playing with danger if we were to remove or significantly weaken some of the key linchpins in the successful strategy of the last seventy years out of a conviction that warfare, or the world, or the nature of man had dramatically changed.