The United States military has a long-term need to access land for training, testing, and other military functions. As a result, numerous military installations are involved in land initiatives aimed at preserving or expanding military land holdings. However, critics claim that declining defense budgets should reduce the need for military land. They argue that there is an aggregate oversupply of military land and that there has been a failure to optimize use. Military land initiatives are seen as driven by an inability to share resources among different military organizations. The critics see the military as indulging in “land grabs” instead of relying on a comprehensive land-use strategy that sets priorities for land initiatives. In this view, the military seems unable to determine its aggregate land needs.

The purpose of this report is to explore this criticism of military land-use policy and determine how the Department of Defense can most appropriately respond. We focus on Army needs and processes, but the implications are relevant to all the services. The issue is critical because 30 percent of DoD lands will come under congressional scrutiny in 2001 with the expiration of the 1986 Military Lands Withdrawal Act. This could coincide with an additional round of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process. Together, these two activities could constitute a review of the entire military basing structure.

We begin by analyzing the organizational and physical boundaries within the DoD and Army land base. We show how the DoD land base is divided among the military services (Army, Navy, Air Force,
and Marine Corps) and by numerous organizational boundaries within each service. The Army’s land is divided among several major commands, subcommands, and installations. At each level, intra-agency organizational boundaries separate the land manager and land user.

At the installation level, the organizational boundaries typically coincide with the physical boundaries, since most installations are physically isolated. We show that most Army soldiers and infrastructure are located on small installations in the East. These are far from the large empty ranges in the West, which constitute the bulk of Army lands. The latter have been used for testing new weapon systems and are now underutilized.

We then review the Army’s methodology for determining land needs. This methodology compares an installation’s needs with the land it has available; it does not consider aggregate Army lands. The methodology tends to exaggerate needs because it does not consider the implicit strategy that the land users employ to cope with land shortfalls. The discrepancy is a product of the intraorganizational lines between land users and land managers. Nevertheless, almost all active units are based on small installations that would benefit from additional land, even if that land is not as critical as the Army’s formal methodology implies it has to be.

One technique used to overcome land deficiencies on small Eastern installations is to visit the National Training Center (NTC) in the Mojave Desert. This suggests that the other large, underutilized Western ranges could be used to offset additional land shortages. However, we show that the costs of moving units for such temporary training are prohibitive and much more onerous than any of the organizational obstacles to using these ranges. Units will pay to visit NTC because of the numerous other training benefits, in addition to the large land areas, that NTC provides.

We then consider the possibility of setting priorities for Army land initiatives. We discuss three of the most important land initiatives of the last fifteen years and show that the military significance of each initiative had little to do with the ultimate outcome. Instead, the availability of the land and local political support were the primary elements of success or failure. Given that additional land will benefit
a significant subset of Army installations (virtually all those housing active units), it is rational for the Army to use feasibility of acquisition as the primary factor for determining whether to pursue a land initiative.

We then discuss the role of simulation technology and BRAC in meeting future land needs. Both BRAC and simulation offer the possibility of overcoming the physical boundaries that divide the DoD land base. However, the Army tends not to evaluate either process for its implications on land use. The organizational boundaries between those monitoring land issues and those responsible for BRAC and simulation must be overcome to develop an effective long-term land-use strategy.

We conclude that the Army has a coherent land-use strategy today, but it is an implicit one, and it has not been explained inside or outside the Army. Physical boundaries prevent a true optimization of Army land use and make the subject of “total Army land needs” into a meaningless concept. We also conclude that there is a broad subset of Army installations that would benefit from additional land and that a policy of protecting and acquiring lands for those installations when feasible is a rational one. Among this subset, the constraints imposed by land-use politics make efforts to set priorities essentially meaningless.

We also emphasize that the implicit strategy is only relevant given the political constraints on base closure and realignment. The Army does not have a strategy for determining its long-range basing needs should it be allowed to make fundamental changes in its basing structure.

We recommend that the Army and the military publish a national land strategy in an effort to explain the constraints described above. Such a strategy would not change decisionmaking, but it would help clarify the need for land despite the drop in the overall defense budget. To do this, the Army would need to overcome the organizational boundaries that exist between land managers and land users and begin to evaluate the land-use implications of simulation technology and BRAC.

In summary, we find that current Army land use policies are driven by physical boundaries. However, the Army’s ability to explain those
policies and to plan for future developments are affected by organizational boundaries.