The United States, despite its unrivaled political and military power in the post–Cold War era, faces an international security environment inherently more ambiguous and potentially less stable than at any time since the end of World War II. Furthermore, because of the inherent complexity of the situation—coupled with the absence of the principal organizing intellectual construct for the uses of national power that guided the containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War—the United States has found itself largely in a reactive posture, forced to deal with each challenge on a case-by-case basis and often with only brief warning. One of the central questions facing policymakers engaged in formulating national security policy is that of crafting strategies—and shaping the military forces to execute the strategies—to deter future conflict.

This report is intended to provide an introduction to the coercive use of conventional military power for military and civilian professionals involved in the practical application of such power. It focuses on conventional coercion, employing two approaches in the assessment of which force capabilities and conditions are most likely to coerce a potential enemy or lead to his early defeat. First, we reviewed the literature on coercion to identify relevant theory, developed working definitions, and located conflict databases and assessed their utility. Although we provide definitions for coercion that include all the elements of national power (diplomatic, economic, informational, and military), we concentrate on the utility of military power as a coercive instrument in deterrence and compellence—and if coercion fails, conflict termination. Second, we selected and analyzed cases (both U.S. and foreign, successes and failures) that would provide
insights into conventional coercion across the spectrum of military operations. The case analysis focused on the following:

- Assessing what form(s) of coercion were involved.
- Distilling insights about why the coercion was successful or unsuccessful.
- Determining the force packages employed in the cases and which of their capabilities were most effective.
- Deriving insights from the cases that should be relevant in the future.

For purposes of sorting the cases, we used four categories: stability and support operations, smaller-scale contingencies, major theater wars, and strikes and raids.

We also developed a theoretical framework in an effort to answer the following question: What does it take to coerce? We postulate that to answer this question one must make two fundamental assessments. The first assessment is qualitative: an analysis of the adversary’s deterrence/compellence threshold vis-à-vis the issue at stake (the context). The second is largely quantitative: an assessment of the capabilities possessed by the adversary. From this appreciation, a net assessment can be conducted to determine the adversary’s strengths and weaknesses and what will likely be required to coerce or defeat him. In short, one must understand the adversary’s will and capabilities to determine the resources and means necessary to coerce him and, if coercion fails, to force him to meet your demands.

In the final chapter of the report, we provide a matrix that combines our theoretical coercion framework with the cases we analyzed. Using this construct, we gleaned insights about the degree of effort and the force mixes required at different points along the spectrum of operations to coerce the adversaries analyzed in the cases. Two other sets of insights are also presented. First, we provide a table that compares the positive attributes and the potential liabilities of ground (Army and Marine Corps), air, and naval forces from the perspective of their utility as coercive instruments. Second, we discuss the following insights specifically regarding the use of ground forces in coercion strategies or interventions:
At the lower end of the spectrum of operations, early arriving and capable ground forces often have high value. Indeed, in stability and support operations (where population control is essential—e.g., KFOR in Kosovo) and strikes (where the objective is to change a regime that has marginal capabilities—e.g., Operation Just Cause in Panama), ground forces offer the most, and often the only, effective military option.

At the higher end of the spectrum (where U.S. ground forces are not already present), early arriving ground forces demonstrate U.S. commitment, both to friends and foes, and they potentially deny the aggressor the prospect of an easy victory—but with some risk. Unless ground forces are operating in an environment of air superiority, and with substantial joint presence to compensate for the lack of mass of the initial ground force vis-à-vis the adversary, they can be at great risk (e.g., Task Force Smith during the Korean War). Therefore, some form of joint or coalition support must be available in-theater in situations where the adversary has significant capabilities in case friendly ground forces need to be built up. In short, ground tripwires must have substantial joint capability behind them if they are to be militarily as well as politically significant.

Modest in-place U.S. ground forces (e.g., Korea, Southwest Asia, Bosnia, Kosovo), backed up by joint and coalition capabilities, have a significant deterrent value and provide a regional stabilizing effect. They also deny the adversary the prospect of an easy victory and send a clear signal of U.S. commitment. Finally, they provide a base around which follow-on U.S. forces can form.

Historical examples that might support the hypothesis that an early arriving ground force can preclude aggression by an adversary are ambiguous, although the threat of an imminent airborne assault did result in Raul Cedras leaving power in Haiti in 1994. This is particularly true in the case of an adversary that has significant military capabilities. Again, what early arriving ground forces primarily demonstrate is U.S. resolve: They are the harbinger of a much larger, overwhelming follow-on force (e.g., Operation Desert Shield), and thus their specific military capabilities are less important than their political significance.
• Unsuccessful interventions (e.g., Vietnam, Somalia) can have lasting effects beyond the realm of military operations in that they can negatively affect U.S. political will, reduce the credibility of U.S. military deterrence abroad, and raise potential adversaries’ perceptions of the contestability of U.S. power.

• Deterrence/intervention successes that do not remove the pre-conditions that caused the conflict can lead to long-term commitments to ongoing coercive regimes (e.g., Korea, Southwest Asia).

As the United States develops national security and national military strategies for the future security environment, the challenges are complex. Although the more familiar threat of cross-border, interstate aggression is still a possibility that must be deterred in some regions, new and different security problems must be addressed in the future. Internal wars that have external dimensions because of their threats to U.S. interests, their humanitarian dimensions (including genocide), and their effect on U.S. public opinion may again require action. Furthermore, the nature of future threats, particularly with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and major international terrorism, will require new approaches to deterrence, particularly in the realm of homeland security. This report, however, shows that the essential nature of devising effective coercive strategies has not changed. One must understand not only an adversary’s capabilities and the threshold that must be reached to coerce him, but also effectively communicate to him that you have both the will and the capability to prevail.