WASHINGTON—Gen. Ray Odierno ’86 MS has faced plenty of challenges during his 36 years in the U.S. Army since graduating from West Point in 1976. He has sat across the negotiating table from the Russians, using his master’s in nuclear engineering from NC State to help hammer out agreements on intermediate-range nuclear weapons. As the general in charge of operations in northern Iraq, Odierno oversaw the capture of Saddam Hussein in 2003, famously describing the former dictator as hiding like a rat in a hole when he was found. He’s even joined Comedy Central’s Stephen Colbert for an on-camera a cappella duet of “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” in tribute to troops returning home from Iraq.

Gen. Ray Odierno ’86 MS tackles his latest mission—downsizing the Army he has served in for 36 years.
QUICKLY ON YOUR FEET AND YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO ADAPT AND ADJUST. WE'RE EXPECTING MORE AND MORE OUT OF OUR YOUNG LEADERS AS WE MOVE FORWARD. “YOU HAVE TO CULTURALLY UNDERSTAND WHERE YOU'RE OPERATING, YOU HAVE TO BE MORE QUICKLY ON YOUR FEET AND YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO ADAPT AND ADJUST. WE'RE EXPECTING MORE AND MORE OUT OF OUR YOUNG LEADERS AS WE MOVE FORWARD.”

“We know what the Army was supposed to do over the last decade—large-scale, protracted stability operations,” says Todd Harrison, a senior fellow for defense budget studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington, D.C. “We’re also pretty sure we’re not going to be doing that again in the near future. The country just doesn’t have the appetite for it. But that still leaves the question of what the Army is going to do. Peacekeeping operations? Smaller stabilization operations? Is it going to be a lighter Army, more faster, respond faster— maybe work more with special operations? We just don’t know yet.” Those are the sorts of questions that Odierno—who is known simply as “The Chief” in the halls of the Pentagon—is wrestling with. Sitting in his spacious Pentagon office, where an electronic message board gives him the time from spots around the globe (“We have soldiers all over the world,” he says matter-of-factly), Odierno says he is confident he can make the Army smaller and better at the same time. “With the cuts, as currently staged, we can meet the needs of our nation and continue to provide the right security for our nation,” he says. “I truly believe that.”

That may require some base-closings, which Odierno knows would be politically difficult. Most of the reductions will be handled through attrition, but Odierno has to make sure that he doesn’t lose the best soldiers and officers, those who have learned valuable lessons from their time in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will require organizational changes, which may require shifts in personnel at all levels. While Odierno’s plans are still being developed, he has offered some insight into his vision for the new Army. Noticeably absent is talk of new weapons systems that might give soldiers a greater technological edge, a tacit acknowledgment of the new budget realities. Instead, Odierno talks about making his soldiers more aware of the cultures of the countries and regions where they might be asked to fight. That emphasis is seen in his plans to assign units to specific regions of the world for extended periods, including a new effort to align with military forces in Africa and a new joint training initiative with the Australian military as the U.S. Army shifts some of its attention and resources to Asia and the Pacific region. But it can also be seen on the campus of NC State, where the Department of Defense has provided grant money to pay for intensive foreign language instruction in Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Russian and Urdu for ROTC students. “You have to culturally understand where you’re operating,” Odierno says. “You have to be more disciplined in how you conduct your operations. You have to be able to think very quickly on your feet and you have to be able to adapt and adjust. We’re expecting more and more out of our young leaders as we move forward.”

Odierno visits a military hospital at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, left; and testifies before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Com- mittee in Washington D.C., right.
Officers have to be able to respond quickly to any new information they may receive, whether it moves through normal military channels or via Facebook or Twitter. Odierno also talks about strategically aligning more traditional Army units with Special Operations forces, giving them the ability to be more nimble in responding to changing conditions.

“I have to learn from the lessons of the last ten years, and then try to apply them to what we think the future complex environments are,” Odierno says. “So we need a force that is leaner, we need a force that is agile, we need a force that is flexible, we need a force that can adapt to what I call discriminately lethal. Because as we move forward, we do not want to have collateral damage. We don’t want to have civilian casualties.”

Odierno is driven, naturally, by his own experiences during three tours in Iraq, in which he was once the commander of all the multinational forces there. Odierno, who went to high school in Rockaway, N.J., before enrolling in West Point, was initially drawn to the Army by its camaraderie and the moral and ethical values that he found there. The Army he joined was in a period of transition following Vietnam—most notably going from an army that relied on the draft to one that relied on volunteers—and he has relished the chance to help the Army change and rebuild itself throughout his career. “I felt I was part of something that was bigger than myself, and I wanted to continue to do that,” he says.

It was Odierno’s military career that brought him to NC State in the 1980s. He was a captain in the Army, stationed at Fort Bragg in eastern North Carolina, when he was selected by the Army to go to graduate school. The Army picked what he would study—nuclear engineering—and Odierno picked the school. “North Carolina State had one of the most highly ranked nuclear engineering programs in the country,” he says. But Odierno had been out of school for eight years, and the transition from the military to academia was initially difficult. “I had to readjust,” he says, “and the people at NC State helped me do that, and they helped me succeed.”

Odierno has stayed connected to NC State, returning to the university in December 2010 to deliver the winter commencement address. He used that occasion to challenge today’s students to look for opportunities to serve, either through the military or in their communities. “Only when we commit to a cause greater than ourselves can we reach our full potential,” he told the new graduates.

That sentiment applies to Odierno’s feelings about the young men and women in today’s all-volunteer Army, who he says have far fewer discipline problems than the Army experienced during Vietnam. He says today’s soldiers are generally more physically fit and more mentally prepared than soldiers of the past. He also says today’s soldiers are more battle-tested than their predecessors after a decade of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of his concerns is figuring out how to reduce the Army’s ranks without losing the knowledge and experience gained during that period.

The same can be said, Odierno notes, of the National Guard, which has fought side-by-side with regular Army soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The new head of the Army National Guard at Gen. William E. Ingram Jr.’s office in the Pentagon, says that today’s National Guard is a far cry from the “weekend warriors” that they were derisively referred to for years. The soldiers in today’s Guard have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, often side-by-side with regular Army soldiers. Many of them, like their Army counterparts, have done multiple tours in Iraq.

“We’re the most experienced that we’ve been in our history,” says Ingram, who grew up in Elizabeth City, N.C., and still maintains a home in eastern North Carolina. “In theater, you can’t tell the difference in a guardsman and an active-duty soldier. They have performed quite well during the war period.”

Ingrams cuts are also coming to the National Guard, but he hopes that he can maintain strong training for his citizen-soldiers so that they don’t lose the knowledge they gained in Iraq and Afghanistan. “We’re probably the best value for America because of the great experience and the upgrade of equipment that we have gotten during the last decade while we have been at war,” Ingram says.

Odierno says the Guard’s role will change, but exactly how is not yet clear. “The active component can’t continue on the same page; the National Guard can’t continue on the same page,” he says. “But what we don’t want is to lose this great experience that we’ve gained in the National Guard. We’ve got to find that right balance between exploiting their experience, but not doing so at the expense of long-term deployments and mobilization.”

As he sorts through his plans for the Army, Odierno must wrestle with numerous constituencies—from Congress to leaders of the other branches of the military. But one constituency—the men and women now serving in the Army—takes precedence for Odierno. As cuts are made, he is determined that the soldiers who have fought these past 10 years—and their families—are taken care of. “We’ve got to make sure that we take care of those who have served and those who have been injured, whether he physically or psychologically casualties,” he says. “We want to make sure we take care of our soldiers and families who have served so valiantly over the last ten years.”
And then there is his commitment to telling the Army’s story, whether it be through a guest appearance on Stephen Colbert’s show, The Colbert Report, on Comedy Central (where he once gave Colbert a military uniform), or through his Facebook page to congratulate the winners of a contest for drill sergeants, to post videos of his interviews with other leaders of the Army can do this with a strategy of what the Army needs to be in the future, the draw-down can be done efficiently and we could have an Army that’s better suited for what the country needs.”

Odierno has not used those platforms, however, to protest the cuts being proposed for the Army. Instead, “I think it’s important that people understand the sacrifice of our Army and that we’re here to provide their security,” he says. “So I try to do whatever I can to do that.”

Harrison, with the defense think tank in Washington, D.C., says it is impossible to overstate the challenge that Odierno faces. “It’s going to be painful,” he says. “It’s going to be difficult. But if Odierno, Ingram and other leaders of the Army can do this with a strategy of what the Army needs to be in the future, the draw-down can be done efficiently and we could have an Army that’s better suited for what the country needs.”

One longtime Washington observer says that even after a wildly successful 36-year military career, Odierno’s greatest legacy may just now be in the making. “Up to now, history has remembered generals generally by the campaigns they fought,” Doyle McManus, a Washington columnist for the Los Angeles Times, wrote earlier this year. “By that measure, Gen. Odierno has already made his mark through the successful surge in Iraq he helped orchestrate. But ultimately, he may be remembered primarily for something less dramatic but more important: using the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan to create a smaller but smarter force.”

Gen. William E. Ingram Jr., ’70 is promoted in November 2011 by Odierno and Gen. Craig McKinney, chief of the National Guard Bureau, left, Ingram speaking at a National Guard conference in Arkansas, above.

ON THE WEB
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Keywords: William Ingram, Gen. William E. Odierno

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TALKING THE TALK
NC State helps future military officers learn the language and culture of other lands.

Coferi, who did a tour in Afghanistan before joining the ROTC staff at NC State, says difficult situations can be defused by being able to exchange pleasantries or talk about food or water in the native tongue. “They immediately look at you differently,” he says. “They don’t look at you as a foreign machine. They look at you as an ally.”

Wesley Templeton knows that the challenges he will face in the Air Force will be different from those that his grandfather confronted as a pilot during the Korean War. That’s why Templeton, a senior from Boone, N.C., is studying Chinese at NC State. “Understanding cultures and diplomacy and how we interact outside of fighting is more important,” says Templeton, who is majoring in aerospace engineering. “My generation of officers is going to have to face those problems.”

Messha, who also teaches French at NC State, says language differences can lead to disastrous results in a combat situation. She recalled an ROTC student who received basic language training from the military before being sent to Iraq. He demonstrated by trying to say “stop” in Arabic. “It didn’t sound anything like the word,” Messha said. “He said it so wrong that it sounded like another word that means ‘how are you’! So if you wanted someone to stop and you said that this way, they’re not going to stop and you’re going to shoot them. This is very serious.”

—Bill Krueger

On the web: www.rotcprojectgo.org

On the web: www.facebook.com/RayOdierno

The class sizes are small, giving the teachers time to provide individual attention to students trying to learn a foreign language quickly.