

THE REAGAN MILITARY BUILDUP

By Jo Husbands*

The Reagan Administration has presided over the largest sustained military buildup in peacetime U.S. history. From 1981 through 1984, Congress approved \$996 billion in budget authority for the Department of Defense (DOD) — 95 percent of what DOD asked for.¹ The Reagan Administration's second five year defense plan (FY1986-90) called for \$1.98 trillion in budget authority and \$1.74 trillion in outlays, which would raise defense spending from 22 percent of all federal spending in FY1980 (the last full year of the Carter Administration) to 35 percent by 1990.²

But the momentum of this military buildup ground to a halt in early 1985. Without even waiting for formal presentation of the Fiscal 1986 proposal, leaders of the President's own party in the Senate began drafting an alternative military budget at considerably lower levels of funding. Significant cuts appeared so certain that *Armed Forces Journal International* reduced its coverage of the Administration's proposals because detailed descriptions of those initial figures would quickly become irrelevant.³ In the face of massive federal deficits, budget axes were sharpened all over Capitol Hill, and for the first time the defense budget felt their edge.

By the time a Congressional budget resolution for FY 1986 was passed, the President and the Pentagon had been forced to accept considerably less than they had originally requested. Instead of the 6 percent "real" growth in budget authority and the 8.3 percent increase in outlays, the Administration agreed to settle for a freeze.⁴ In FY1986, military spending will expand only to cover the rate of inflation, and Congressional leaders predict that achieving even 3 percent real growth in the next few years will be a formidable task.⁵

The Reagan Administration's defense program has come under assault from many sources. Some critics focus on management failures, citing as evidence the deluge of recent weapons procurement scandals.⁶ As mentioned earlier, concern over the federal deficit has brought some to demand that defense spending must bear a portion of the responsibility for reductions; others argue that domestic spending has suffered unfairly while defense spending remained sacrosanct.⁷ Some critics focus on certain weapons programs or strategies; for example, the massive modernization and expansion of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the "Star Wars" program have both come under heavy attack.⁸

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¹Michael Ganley, "DOD asks 5.9% real growth in FY86, but deficit threatens dubious digits," *Armed Forces Journal International* 122:8 (March, 1985): pp. 56-64.

²The calculations are based on data from U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 1986." U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 293.

³Ganley, p. 58.

⁴George C. Wilson, "Defense dept. seen facing lean years," *Washington Post*, 12 September, 1985, p. A10.

⁵Bill Keller, "Military cutting spending plans for next 5 years," *New York Times*, 23 September, 1985, p. A1.

⁶For example, Lori Comeau, "Nuts and Bolts at the Pentagon: A Spare Parts Catalogue." Defense Budget Project, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington, DC (August, 1984).

⁷Robert W. DeGrasse, Jr., *Military Expansion, Economic Decline* (New York, Council on Economic Priorities, 1983), and Children's Defense Fund, *A Children's Defense Budget: An Analysis of the President's FY1985 Budget and Children*. (Washington, DC, Children's Defense Fund, 1984).

⁸For example, Union of Concerned Scientists, *The Fallacy of Star Wars* (New York, Vintage Books, 1984), and Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (New York, Random House, 1982).

These disparate criticisms have gained sufficient strength to slow the defense spending juggernaut, but so far their efforts have focused on establishing some overall dollar level or percentage rate of spending growth. (It is a measure of the Reagan Administration's success that proposals for significant cuts in defense spending are not even considered a serious part of the policy debate.) It is very much an open question whether the current criticisms can be welded into a coherent, sustained assessment of the Reagan budget that goes beyond a focus on dollars to an evaluation of the present U.S. defense program and the primary alternatives to it.

This paper attempts to provide the basis for such an evaluation, by covering the major criticisms of Reagan's defense program, addressing its ability to protect and advance U.S. national security. It therefore deals with questions of effective management of the Pentagon, and with the assessment of threats to U.S. security and the choice of appropriate strategies and weapons to meet them. It does not address either the "fairness" or the deficit reduction arguments. It also does not deal with the arguments of those who contend that defense spending should be even higher than the Reagan Administration's program.

The paper's central thesis is that even if one accepts the Reagan Administration's perfervid view of the conventional threats to U.S. security, the United States could have military forces more capable of meeting those threats at substantially lower cost than the Reagan program. This is possible because the Administration's defense program is fundamentally flawed. Even if the enormous federal deficits did not force reconsideration, the Administration's headlong pursuit of unrealistic strategies should. The failure to establish clear priorities avoids the need to make choices among costly competing programs, while the free rein given the military services exacerbates the Pentagon's worst management problems.

After four years of unchecked growth, restoring a sound defense program will be difficult. Some choices have already been foreclosed because weapons systems have proceeded too far into production for there to be a realistic hope of cancelling them. The challenge is to work within these constraints to correct the current program's most egregious problems, and lay the foundation for sensible choices in the future.

The Reagan Program

One of the favorite images invoked by the Reagan Administration in support of its budget is the "decade of neglect" of U.S. military needs which the Administration inherited, and which it now takes credit for overcoming. "America at mid-decade is strong and proud, a posture befitting our leadership role in the world," announced Defense Secretary Weinberger's annual report to Congress for FY1986.⁹ Overall there is no significant difference in the average annual rates of weapons production between the "neglect" of the Ford and Carter years and the "buildup" of the first Reagan term. Either the Administration has achieved far less than it claims or the 1970s provided a great deal more for defense, but one of the treasured myths ought to be laid to rest.

Driven by its vision of underfunded and poorly armed U.S. forces facing an awesome Soviet military machine, the Reagan Administration has concentrated on buying as many weapons as quickly as possible. Procurement has been the fastest growing portion of the defense budget, more than doubling in the last four years. In FY1986, 45 percent of requested budget authority was to be allocated to the procurement and the research and development accounts; in FY1980, they received 34 percent.¹⁰ Over 10 percent of total FY1986 budget authority was to be spent on just ten

⁹Annual Report to Congress, p. 14.

¹⁰Calculations based on data in the Annual Report to Congress, p. 293.

huge hardware and research programs.¹¹ Even press reports in the fall of 1985 of a new, lower five year defense plan indicated that the Administration planned no cancellations of weapons programs and no reduction in the nuclear budget.¹² Such intensive procurement is unnecessary, poses serious risks for overall U.S. military capabilities and readiness, and dashes hopes of efficiently managing the Defense Department.

Too Much Too Quickly

The vast sums being poured into procurement have outstripped even the Pentagon's capacity to spend, resulting in a huge backlog. Since FY 1980, the backlog has grown from \$92.2 billion in unobligated or unexpended funds to an estimated \$280 billion by the end of FY 1986 — more than the Administration's proposed outlays for that year.¹³

Perhaps more serious for efforts to regain control, the share of each year's spending set by prior commitments keeps growing. For FY 1986, 36 percent of the proposed budget was dictated by such obligations, and some experts predict this will increase to over 40 percent by the end of the decade.¹⁴ Such commitments are frequently touted as essential for stable production, and hence lower costs, but when so much goes to procurement, Congressional flexibility and discretion are seriously diminished. Moreover, once they are funded, weapons programs acquire a political momentum that makes retroactive cuts virtually impossible. These already committed funds thus become essentially "uncontrollable" and as a result, restoring discipline to the budget process is that much more difficult.¹⁵

Mortgaging the Future

Beyond the immediate impact on U.S. capabilities, the Administration's buildup is preparing a nightmarish legacy for its successors. Many major weapons systems have an average service life of 20 years. Purchasing thousands of systems so quickly means future planners will confront massive block obsolescence problems when all these weapons reach their normal retirement age. Full replacement would perpetuate the errors of the past, but failing to replace aging systems, however unnecessary, would leave future presidents open to charges of neglecting U.S. defense.¹⁶ Nor has anyone discussed what will happen in the mid-1990s when most proposed Administration purchases will be completed. At that point, the defense industry would face a major recession as contracts end and dozens of production lines close down. Keeping them open, however, would commit the U.S. to maintaining crisis levels of defense spending indefinitely. It would also move toward a complete turnover of the U.S. military inventory every ten years, rather than the twenty year cycle most experts regard as the basis for prudent and rational planning. And with a declining population of 18-22 year-old men and women, at least through the end of the century, it is equally

¹¹Chris Meyer, "Top 10 hardware programs garner 10.4% of DOD FY86 budget request," *Armed Forces Journal International* 122:8 (March, 1985), p. 20.

¹²Keller, p. A1.

¹³Defense Budget Project, *The FY 1986 Defense Budget: The Weapons Buildup Continues* (Washington, DC, Defense Budget Project, April, 1985), p. 1.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁵William W. Kaufmann, *The 1985 Defense Budget* (Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, 1984), p. 4.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 4.

unclear who would operate and maintain all this weaponry.¹⁷ Unless concerted efforts are made now to provide steady, stable growth at reasonable levels, the adverse consequences of the Reagan Administration's programs will be with us for decades.

Redundant Weapons

Defense Secretary Weinberger has adopted a remarkably laissez-faire attitude toward management of the Pentagon; whatever their initial inclinations, defense secretaries since the 1950s have found it necessary to impose direction on the military services. Instead, Weinberger has largely permitted each service to follow its predilection for preparing to fight its own war in its own way with its own weapons. He has then zealously promoted the resulting package of pet projects, defending it against all criticism or challenge.¹⁸

Allowing the services to function as independent fiefs exempt from central management and control has created a budget filled with costly weapons programs whose functions overlap and compete with one another. The cancellation of the DIVAD air defense system eliminated one of the worst such offenders, but that occurred only under intense Congressional pressure.¹⁹ Moreover, the flash of management energy may have been designed to offer a solitary sacrificial lamb with the clear intent of protecting the rest of an unhealthy flock.

Unfortunately, the military services have consistently proved unwilling to challenge or incapable of resisting the internal and intraservice bureaucratic pressures that distort and subvert sound planning. For example, when the Air Force was created as a separate service, it was given the task of providing protection for ground operations, and the Army was prohibited from maintaining its own fixed-wing attack aircraft. Over the years, however, the lure of strategic bombers, missile-carrying air-to-air combat, and striking deep behind enemy lines, has given the Air Force only a limited inclination for the less glamorous close air support role. The Army has therefore been forced to rely on highly vulnerable attack helicopters. It currently plans both an extensive modernization of its existing helicopter force and the purchase of a new fleet of costly AH-64 attack helicopters. The Marines, by contrast, have succeeded in retaining three large fighter-attack aircraft wings of their own, one for each of their divisions. The resulting four separate air forces not only duplicate one another, but potentially reduce the overall effectiveness of our armed forces.²⁰

The redundancies also result from the Administration's conviction that a big defense budget, whatever it contains, is an important independent symbol of U.S. will and resolve. Such an attitude discourages the healthy skepticism and relentless determination necessary to kill even the most obviously worthless weapon system. More important, dollars do not provide security, forces do the fight do. Throwing money at a problem is no substitute for good planning.

¹⁷William W. Kaufmann, *The 1986 Defense Budget* (Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, 1985), p. 31.

¹⁸Discussions of Weinberger's management — and other problems with the Reagan Administration program — can be found in Richard Stubbing, "Defense: buildup or binge?" *Foreign Affairs* 63:4 (Spring, 1985), pp. 848-872, and James Conaway, "Caspar Weinberger's call to arms," *Washington Post Magazine*, 9 October, 1983, pp. 8, 9-17.

¹⁹Charles Corddry, "Military buildup to be slowed," *Baltimore Sun*, September 13, 1985, p. 1., and U.S. Senate, *Committee on Armed Services, "Oversight of the Division Air Defense Gun System (DIVAD),"* Government Printing Office, 1983.

²⁰Stubbing, p. 869-870.

Misdirected Priorities, Mangled Requirements

Those priorities the Administration does express are frequently contradictory or misguided. The dream of making nuclear weapons obsolete has transformed the research effort necessary to keep abreast of potential defense technologies into the grandiose Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). The results of the SDI will almost certainly prove more costly than the offensive countermeasures that will be developed to defeat it.²¹ The proposed crash program could seriously upset the current frustrating, but nonetheless relatively stable, nuclear stalemate. At the same time, the multiple programs for highly accurate missiles designed to destroy "hardened" (that is, specially protected) Soviet targets, such as missile silos and command bunkers, could provoke an offensive arms race. Simultaneous superpower competitions in offensive and defensive countermeasures will leave both sides with more weapons and less security than they have now.²²

Back on earth, Administration plans look no more realistic. Traditionally, the Defense Department sizes and equips U.S. forces to meet certain contingencies, which represent the most important and most likely threats to American interests. The chosen contingencies have altered over time, as the U.S. has responded to the rapid changes of the postwar world. For example, in the 1960s, the U.S. prepared its forces for simultaneous participation in a major land war in Europe, a major land war in Asia, and a "minor" conflict somewhere else (the so-called "2-½ war strategy"). When the Sino-Soviet split reduced American fears of a coordinated assault by a monolithic Communist foe, preparations for a major Asian contingency were dropped, and a "1-½ war" strategy adopted.²³ The important feature of such an approach is the guidance it gives defense planners — how many threats U.S. forces must be able to meet at the same time, and how quickly.

The Reagan Administration, at least rhetorically, has vastly expanded the number of threats the U.S. must prepare for, and has also adopted a much more assertive approach to doing so. The Administration has promulgated the doctrine of "horizontal escalation," whereby U.S. forces could meet Soviet or Soviet-proxy actions in one area by responding in another, presumably more vulnerable area.²⁴ A 600-ship Navy, which is to be prepared to take the war to the enemy through assaults on the Soviet coast, is a conspicuous part of this more assertive strategy.²⁵

Despite this ambitious goal, the Reagan Administration is acquiring expensive airlift capabilities and pre-positioned equipment for just one major contingency.²⁶ Although it raises the spectre of a surprise Soviet invasion of Central Europe, the Administration consistently underfunds programs that would provide the close air support vital to a land battle's early stages. Instead, it is spending generously on air superiority/interdiction aircraft whose impact would be felt only after the decisive land battle had been fought.²⁷ The current defense program is buying too many of the wrong weapons to achieve the wrong goals.

²¹Kaufmann, The 1986 Budget, p. 19-20.

²²Ibid., p. 19-20.

²³Jeffrey Record, "Jousting with unreality: Reagan's military strategy," *International Security* 8:3 (Winter, 1983-84), pp. 6-10.

²⁴Joshua M. Epstein, "Horizontal escalation: Sour notes of a recurrent theme," *International Security* 8:3 (Winter, 1983-84), pp. 19-31.

²⁵Record, p. 9-10.

²⁶Kaufmann, The 1985 Budget, p. 29.

²⁷Kaufmann, The 1986 Budget, p. 38.

Overstated Threats

The Reagan Administration has defended its programs as the minimum necessary to respond to the Soviet threat, even though that threat is far less formidable than DOD rhetoric suggests. Overstating the Soviet threat has two important negative consequences. First, focusing on numbers and concentrating on those measures that show the U.S. at an apparently devastating disadvantage vis-a-vis the Soviet Union leads to an emphasis on American technology as the only answer to the Soviets' numerical superiority. Quality can be an effective match for quantity, but exaggerating the Soviet edge has also led to development of overly sophisticated weapons. In some cases, the technology never fulfills its promise, and serves only to make the systems more difficult to operate. In others, the complicated equipment cannot withstand the stress and strain of battlefield conditions.²⁸

Threat assessments also tend to exaggerate the imminence of Soviet breakthroughs or developments that would undermine U.S. technological advantages. This leads to a crisis atmosphere that rushes weapons systems into production before they can be adequately tested. With many sophisticated systems, slower development that allows more time for testing yields far more effective and reliable weapons. The M-1 tank, for example, has finally overcome its numerous and well-publicized problems, but only after extensive field testing and modification.²⁹ Moreover, the Soviet systems that provoke the crash programs routinely arrive later and prove far less menacing than their advance billing suggested.³⁰

Some of the Administration's most widely advertised threats have either proved false or simply failed to materialize. The President's own Commission on Strategic Forces concluded that the "window of vulnerability," a staple of the 1980 campaign and early Administration statements, will not prove a meaningful threat to overall U.S. strategic capabilities until the 1990s, if at all.³¹ Perhaps more fundamental is the CIA's announcement in 1983 that Soviet military spending, instead of growing relentlessly at 4-5 percent per year, has risen only about 2 percent annually since 1976. Soviet spending on procurement has been essentially flat.³² Yet the current Posture Statement still speaks of the need to "rebuild" U.S. deterrent capabilities and a "massive expansion of Soviet forces".³³ So far, simple reality has not been permitted to hamper the Defense Department's cherished ambitions.

Conclusions

Taken together, the criticisms outlined above provide the basis for a tough, thorough examination of the current U.S. defense program. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an alternative budget in detail, although its outlines should be apparent. For example, any alternative

²⁸These issues are discussed and debated in detail in Asa A. Clark IV, Peter W. Chiarelli, Jeffrey S. McKittrick, and James W. Reed, eds., *The Defense Reform Debate: Issues and Analysis* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). A more popularly written case for the military reform movement is made in James Fallows *National Defense* (New York, Vintage Books, 1982).

²⁹Jeffrey S. McKittrick and Peter Chiarelli, "Defense reform: an appraisal," in Clark, Chiarelli, McKittrick, and Reed, pp. 319-322.

³⁰Andrew Cockburn, *The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine* (New York, Random House, 1983).

³¹U.S. Government, "Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces," Government Printing Office, 1983.

³²Kaufmann, *The 1986 Budget*, pp. 5-7.

³³Annual Report to Congress, p. 15.

that sought to correct present flaws and provide the basis for sound planning in the future should include:

- increasing funds for programs, such as close air support, that best meet the most likely threats to U.S. security in the next decades;
- eliminating the excessive funding of unnecessary, misdirected, and in some cases destabilizing programs, such as the Strategic Defense Initiative and the "600 ship" Navy;
- reducing the duplication of weapons systems, that in part results from allowing the military services free rein to pursue their own preferences without central coordination or discipline; and
- slowing the excessive pace of procurement, which leads to higher costs, massive block obsolescence, and an ultimate dislocation of the defense industrial base.

The essential point is that any changes in military spending must be made in the context of U.S. defense priorities and the means with which they will be achieved. It is not enough to stretch out weapons purchases, or to clean up waste, fraud, and abuse in defense contracting. The first remedy provides inadequate, short-term savings that would not address the basic flaws in the current program. Many of these short-term savings are politically attractive, but they avoid the hard choices that must be made, and may seriously undermine American readiness. Correcting procurement abuses is important, but even if all the waste were eliminated, the Defense Department would simply be buying bad weapons more cheaply.

The only way to restore a sensible U.S. defense program is to cut major weapons programs. Even if some of the savings were invested in meeting real, immediate military needs, such an alternative would cost substantially less than the current program. And, as Secretary Weinberger has repeatedly demanded, this could be accomplished without touching any weapons vital to U.S. national security. Significant spending cuts could be made that would actually enhance this country's long-term military effectiveness by restoring realistic objectives and providing the basis for steady, sustainable levels of funding.