

**UPDATE**

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## **CLINTON'S DEFENSE BUDGET WEAKENS NATION'S INSURANCE AGAINST DISASTER**

(Updating Heritage Foundation *Memo to President-Elect Clinton* No. 4, "A Plan for Preserving America's Military Strength," December 28, 1992.)

When Bill Clinton's budget figures for his February 17 State of the Union Address were released by the White House, they showed a far larger reduction in the defense budget than the \$60 billion he proposed during the presidential campaign. Clinton now wants to slash the defense budget by over \$120 billion between fiscal years 1993 and 1997.<sup>1</sup> This doubling of the defense cut is more than another broken campaign promise. It will mean that America's national security will depend on good luck. With Clinton's proposed defense budget, the U.S. cannot field a military force capable of countering the many threats to American security.

Notwithstanding the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threats are indeed many. Nuclear weapons and missiles are proliferating throughout the world. Democracy could break down in Russia, producing an anti-American nationalist regime bent on restoring the Russian Empire. Iraq and Iran endanger not only Western oil supplies but the security and stability of the Persian Gulf. The list could go on. The Cold War may be over, but as the Persian Gulf War demonstrated, America must be able to fight and win wars in regions where her vital interests are at stake.

The money the nation spends on defense is in many ways analogous to that which American families spend on insurance. Like an insurance policy, a sound defense policy is predicated on the assumption that things can go wrong, that accidents can happen, and that outlaws can inflict harm. While some families are comfortable with the increased risks assumed by not purchasing adequate insurance, prudent ones insure themselves against these risks. If calamity occurs, the unlucky ones face financial ruin. Likewise, if America's luck holds, she may survive Clinton's defense cuts. But if America is not lucky, and the many potential threats become a reality, the result will be far worse than financial ruin—it could be national disaster.

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1 This estimate is based on the comparison of the Clinton Administration's current request for fiscal years 1994 through 1997 with the Bush Administration's fiscal 1993 requested level. As such, the congressional reduction of \$6.5 billion enacted last year for fiscal 1993 is applied to the Clinton total.

**Threats to America's Security Have Changed, But Not Disappeared.** The first step in buying insurance is to obtain a clear understanding of the threats one faces, including health problems, accidents, or crime. The same is true of national security. The threats America faces today are clearly different from those of the Cold War. The primary threat of that era was an expansionist Soviet Union. This overarching threat has all but disappeared.

But new threats to U.S. security have emerged in the wake of the collapsing Soviet Union. For example, the Soviet Union's huge nuclear arsenal still exists and the risk of an accidental or unauthorized launch has increased. Moreover, long-range missile technology is proliferating. The U.S. likely will face a number of countries armed with long-range nuclear missiles within ten years, if not sooner.

Likewise, Russia's appetite for conducting proxy wars in the Third World has all but disappeared. But regional conflicts are still very much a possibility in the post-Cold-War world. Regional bullies such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are still poised to exploit any weakness to achieve regional dominance. And Russia or China could turn belligerent and threaten regional stability in Europe and Asia.

After the long struggle of the Cold War, the American people may be tempted to believe that the world is now safe. But the bitter experience of the military demobilizations after World War I and World War II—whereby America became dangerously weak after great military victories—should hold such temptations in check. The world is still a dangerous place, and there is no substitute for vigilance and preparedness.

Clinton's defense cuts come on the heels of eight straight years of declining defense budgets. This year's defense budget authority—the amount of money the U.S. obligates for defense purposes—is 30 percent lower than in the 1985 budget. Moreover, defense outlays as a percentage of the total federal budget will be 5 percent less this fiscal year than during the mid-1980s. The Clinton Administration is accelerating this alarming decline. In fiscal year 1991, the defense budget was falling 2 percent every year. This year, the average real decline exceeded 3.5 percent. Clinton's annual defense reductions could easily exceed an average of 4 percent per year in real terms if optimistic projections about inflation do not hold up. The result: by 1997 defense outlays will constitute less than 15 percent of all federal outlays, which is 10 percentage points below what it was in 1985.

**The Emerging Gap Between Ends and Means.** Clinton's proposed defense reductions will make it impossible to fulfill America's global military commitments. The first responsibility of a nation is to defend its territory against attack, whether purposeful or accidental. With serious questions now arising about proper control over the nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union, plus the proliferation of missile technology to other countries, the U.S. needs to deploy anti-missile defenses. But the Clinton Administration has proposed an almost 40 percent cut in the fiscal 1994 Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) budget. Cuts of this magnitude are certain to cripple this program for developing and fielding anti-missile defenses.

The U.S. maintains commitments that require its Navy to patrol the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. If Clinton gets his defense budget, the Navy will shrink to some 300 ships, with fewer than the ten aircraft carriers the President has promised. The Navy cannot maintain continuous patrols in these three areas with so few ships. But Navy personnel should be forewarned. If crises arise, the Clinton Administration will try to fulfill its responsibilities by adopting backbreaking nine- and ten-month deployments. Normally most deployments are about six months long.

If the U.S. were to face two regional crises simultaneously, American forces would not be up to the task. Iraq could several years hence still be defying U.N. Security Council resolutions in ways that could require air strikes or constant patrols of the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, North Korea in a last desperate effort to gain control of South Korea could launch an attack. With the U.S. military shrunken by Clinton cuts, it could not respond to these two crises at the same time. It would be short of the ships, personnel, and equipment needed to perform its missions.

Conducting and completing combat operations is only the most visible purpose of the U.S. military. Its capabilities and presence pay more modest dividends every day by fostering regional stability and reducing the risk of conflict. U.S. military strength and resolve have served to assure German and Japanese security since the end of World War II. As such, neither country has felt obliged to rearm. But how long can the U.S. proceed along its current path of disarmament before Germany or Japan concludes that America is unable to meet its security commitments? A militarily strong Germany or Japan undoubtedly will foster regional suspicions in Europe and Asia. The cost to the U.S. of addressing the regional instabilities fostered by a rearmed Japan or Germany would be far higher than making more modest investments now, which are required to avoid such an outcome.

Bill Clinton has inherited a strong military that is America's insurance policy against calamity. But Clinton's defense budget shows a willingness to weaken this policy. His defense budget cuts will leave America unable to protect its interests and fulfill its global commitments. Lacking proper defense insurance, America will have to depend increasingly on good luck in international affairs. But as history shows, protecting America's security in a dangerous world requires more than hope and a prayer. In fact, it requires a good insurance policy. It requires a military that prevents an attack on the national interest from becoming a national disaster.

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