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RHETORIC VS. REALITY: ASSESSING CLINTON'S DEFENSE POLICY

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

The Clinton Administration's first-year performance in national security policy was poor by any objective measure. In every area of performance as Commander in Chief, the President failed to live up to expectations or to his own rhetoric.

Bill Clinton's record in the employment of American might around the world is indefensible. Over two dozen soldiers were killed in Somalia after the President and his advisers expanded the mission there from feeding the hungry to building a nation and disarming a tribal warlord's army. No conceivable national interest was advanced by this change of policy. In Haiti, the decision to send in military peacekeepers to enforce a United Nations cease-fire agreement was rescinded when a United States warship was prevented from docking and humiliated by a gang of armed thugs on the pier. In the former Yugoslavia, where the President himself raised the stakes during the 1992 presidential campaign, the Administration's empty and ill-advised threats of military action to stop the bloodshed have infuriated America's European allies and very likely emboldened potential adversaries.¹

In national security planning, the President claimed credit throughout the year for having developed the first comprehensive post-Cold War review of America's defense requirements. But his decision to fire the author of the plan, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, calls into question his Administration's commitment to that so-called Bottom-Up Review.²

Moreover, Clinton's budget proposals during his first year make it clear that he places a low priority on the quality of America's armed forces. If enacted, his proposed defense budget cuts will be more than double the reductions he promised while campaigning for the presidency, and there is ample evidence that those cuts already are having an impact on combat readiness.³

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- 1 For a full discussion on the options available to the Clinton Administration when it took office, see Baker Spring, "Assessing America's Military Options In Bosnia," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 939, May 7, 1993.
 - 2 For a full discussion of the Bottom-Up Review, see Lawrence T. Di Rita, et al., "Thumbs Down To The Bottom-Up Review," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 957, September 22, 1993.
 - 3 For a full discussion of military readiness, see John F. Luddy, "Stop The Slide Toward a Hollow Military," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder Update* No. 209, January 14, 1994.

The best way to measure the President's performance is to compare his actions to his promises. It is clear in doing so that he has learned little from the events of 1993. In his State of the Union address on January 25, for example, Clinton made several claims about his commitment to a strong defense or regarding the state of America's defenses today. However, these assertions do not match reality.

ASSERTION #1: "The budget I [will] send to Congress draws the line against further defense cuts."

This statement apparently means that the President does not intend to cut the defense budget any more than already planned. So far he has decided to slash the budget by twice the amount he promised during the 1992 presidential campaign. Having pledged to trim only \$60 billion beyond the Bush cuts through 1997, Clinton actually has reduced the defense budget by \$120 billion. Further, his current budget plans signal that he is prepared to cut force structure levels even below those proposed in the Bottom-Up Review, which will only invite even more budget reductions later in his term.

ASSERTION #2: "[N]othing — nothing — is more important to our security than our nation's armed forces."

The President has made no secret of the fact that he prefers to concentrate on domestic issues. As reported by *The Washington Post* during the search for the Administration's third defense secretary in less than a year, one unnamed advisor noted that "[the Administration] really just wanted to get the Pentagon off the screen. Every time it was on, it was trouble that interfered with the President's agenda. Their attitude was, if they could subcontract out the Pentagon, they would."⁴

As much as he may wish to do so, the President cannot "subcontract out" his responsibilities as Commander in Chief—not to his National Security Adviser, not to his Secretary of Defense, and not to the United Nations Secretary General, as he tried to do in Somalia and Haiti. The tragic events of 1993, including the deaths of over two dozen Americans in Somalia, suggest the President is trying to do just that. Instead of using rhetoric to create the impression of being committed to America's national security, the President should simply commit the resources required to ensure a strong military.

ASSERTION #3: "Last year, I proposed a defense plan that maintains our post-Cold War security...."

True, but the President no longer supports this plan, known as the Bottom-Up Review. The Bottom-Up Review is collapsing and starved for funds that could fall short of requirements by \$95 billion. Reports are already emerging that the military services are formulating plans to reduce their forces to levels below those recommended in the Bottom-Up Review.⁵

By his budget recommendations, the President is making it clear that even he does not support the findings of the Bottom-Up Review. The budget he has proposed covering fiscal 1995 through 1999 will support an Army force structure 20 percent smaller than that envisioned in the Bottom-Up Review. In addition it allows for 16 percent fewer Navy ships, only 77 percent of the Marine Corps troop strength, and an Air Force 70 percent the size of that outlined in the study.

4 Ann Devroy and Barton Gellman, "How Search Finally Led to Perry," *The Washington Post*, January 24, 1994, p. A1.

5 David A. Fulghum, "USAF May Cut Forces By Additional 10-15%," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, January 3, 1994, pp. 25-26.

But the best indication that the President no longer supports the plan is his decision in December 1993 to fire its author, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin. In the week before his departure was announced, Aspin had begun to challenge in public Budget Director Leon Panetta's assertion that an additional \$50 billion in defense cuts would be needed to meet the Administration's spending targets over five years.

ASSERTION #4: "We honor [the armed forces'] contributions...."

Clinton's actions speak louder than his words. He tried last year to force the military to accept acknowledged homosexuals in the ranks, a highly unpopular move contrary to good order and combat readiness that was forestalled by Congress. Moreover, his first budget submission included a freeze on military pay, a move also overridden by Congress. Given the President's youthful and brash comments about "loving [the] country but loathing the military...,"⁶ these initiatives do not suggest the actions of a President who honors the armed forces. Nor have they done anything to raise the low esteem in which he was held by members of the armed services when he assumed office.

Easing his strained relationship with the military is among the most pressing problems the President faces. To be sure, the U.S. armed services are made up of professionals who understand the Constitution and the inviolability of civilian control over the military. But while respect for the office is inviolate, respect for the office holder must often be earned. President Clinton will not earn that respect with platitudes that ignore his unfortunate performance as Commander in Chief during his first year. He should instead acknowledge his mistakes and develop a national security strategy based on strong defense and global leadership.

ASSERTION #5: "Our forces are the finest military our nation has ever had...."

This statement is simply untrue. Had it been made in 1991, it would have been true. But who can argue that a Navy which has 413 ships in 1994 is stronger than one that had 528 ships in 1991? Likewise, who believes that an Army of 20 active and reserve divisions in 1994 is stronger than one which had 26 total divisions in 1991? The Air Force is no better off, having lost 10 tactical air wings since 1991.

Defense spending has been on a downward spiral since its peak in 1985; it has been reduced by nearly 40 percent since that time. But the Clinton defense budget implies that further cuts are possible and even desirable.

Worse, the quality of military personnel has begun to decline. Secretary Aspin on June 2, 1993, acknowledged that the percentage of new military recruits with high school diplomas had dropped from 97 percent in 1991 to 94 percent in 1993 and that enlistment test scores also declined during the same period.⁷ Concerns about military readiness generally prompted Aspin to form a blue-ribbon commission of retired generals and admirals to examine these questions. It is well past time for Clinton to recognize that the armed forces are weaker than they were in 1991 and as a result of his defense program will be far weaker yet in the future.

6 William J. Clinton letter to LTC Eugene Holmes, Director of the Reserve Officer Training Corps program at the University of Arkansas, December 3, 1969.

7 John Lancaster, "Aspin Voices Concern About Slight Decline in Quality of Recruits," *The Washington Post*, June 3, 1993, p. A7.

ASSERTION #6: "... [A]s long as I am President, [the armed forces] will remain the best trained, best equipped, and best prepared fighting force on the face of the earth."

The President is wrong on all counts. The Clinton cuts already have begun to have a negative impact on training, equipment procurement, and combat readiness. Funding for the purchase of new equipment and research and development of future weapons systems has been slashed by Clinton, while equipment modernization accounts are also suffering.

There will be a 17 percent reduction in procurement spending in 1994. As a result, less new equipment and weapons will be purchased. Research and development also will drop by 10 percent, limiting future Presidents from having the wide range of modern weapons Clinton enjoyed as a result of defense build-up in the 1980s.

Clinton's defense reductions are across the board. Several critical weapons programs, including the Air Force's Multi-Role Fighter aircraft, and the Navy's A/F-X fighter-attack aircraft have been cancelled without replacements. Meanwhile, funding for the nation's premier high technology defense program, ballistic missile defense, has been halved.

Routine maintenance levels are also in decline. For the first time in a decade, for example, less than 90 percent of Marine Corps equipment is ready to go to war.⁸ The Marine Corps' backlog in maintenance has gone from zero to \$160 million in two years.⁹ The Navy has 150 aircraft and 250 aircraft engines overdue for maintenance because of budget shortfalls.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Army's budget for modernizing its forces is under-funded by \$1 billion.¹¹

Clinton may claim to support a modern, well-equipped, and well-trained military for the future, but his actions do not reflect this priority. America's ability to develop and field high-tech weapons of the future is withering, while training and readiness have already been affected by the military's inability to keep its equipment in good repair. Today's military can continue operating the weapons developed and built in the 1980s, but Clinton's successors will inherit armed forces greatly weakened by his short-sighted military investment policies.

CONCLUSION

Now that Clinton has a new Secretary of Defense, he has the opportunity to try again to develop a coherent national security strategy. A responsible first step would be to scrap Aspin's Bottom-Up Review and develop a plan that addresses America's global interests and for which the Administration is prepared to pay.¹²

8 General Carl E. Mundy, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, Statement for the Record Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 19, 1993.

9 Margo McFarland, "Nunn Warns That Outlay Problem in '95 Could Be Even Worse Than '94," *Inside the Navy*, June 21, 1993, p. 17.

10 Admiral Frank B. Kelso II, Statement For the Record Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 19, 1993.

11 \$1 Billion of Army Modernization Plans Unfunded," *Inside the Pentagon*, July 22, 1993, p. 5.

12 For a full slate of recommendations for the new Secretary of Defense, see John Luddy, "A National Security Agenda for the New Secretary of Defense," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 214, February 10, 1994.

President Clinton's first year in office will not be remembered for its foreign and defense policy successes. The low point was in early October, when 18 Americans died at the hands of a Somali tribal chief-tain and an American warship was prevented from docking by a gang of Haitian thugs. Such humiliation demands a sober reassessment of priorities and objectives, and not the braggadocio of the President's first State of the Union Address.

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