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KEEPING FAITH WITH THE TROOPS: WHY CLINTON SHOULD SIGN THE DOD BILL

On December 19, the Senate approved the Department of Defense authorization bill, sending it to President Bill Clinton for his signature. The bill authorizes national security programs for both the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy for fiscal year 1996.

President Clinton, however, has threatened to veto the defense bill. The President objects to the bill's provisions banning abortions at military hospitals, discharging military personnel with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and earmarking funds for shipbuilding and other programs. But his biggest problem appears to be the bill's demand that the nation begin building defenses against ballistic missiles. Clinton is prepared to sacrifice the entire DOD bill—one that raises pay for U.S. troops, including those being deployed to Bosnia—because he cannot tolerate a bill that demands protection for the American people against missile attack.

The President needs to take a step back from his thoughtless threat to veto the DOD bill. Too much is at stake to play politics with the nation's security and the lives and well-being of U.S. troops overseas. He should sign the DOD bill because it:

- ✓ **Supports the troops in Bosnia.** President Clinton has argued tirelessly that the nation needs to support U.S. troops in Bosnia. He is right. But how can he demand that others support the troops while he vetoes the very bill that authorizes funds for the troops? The Department of Defense authorization bill establishes the legal foundation for all the programs necessary to conduct Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia. These include programs for military pay, operations, and procurement, as well as many intelligence programs. While many of these programs already are funded through the Department of Defense appropriations bill, which was approved earlier, their proper management still requires authorization.
- ✓ **Improves the quality of life for military personnel.** The Defense authorization bill provides a 2.4 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for military pay and a 5.2 percent increase in funding for housing allowances. A presidential veto will block the full implementation of these adjustments in pay and benefits. The White House statement on the authorization bill indicates that the President supports these adjustments, but his threat of a veto implies otherwise. Why would a President who vetoes an entire federal budget bill because it does not provide increases in benefits to Medicare beneficiaries at the rate he desires not give the same consideration to military personnel by signing the Department of Defense authorization bill? Military personnel—particularly troops risking their lives in Bosnia—deserve at least the same level of presidential support as Medicare beneficiaries.
- ✓ **Funds the Bottom-Up Review force.** In 1993, President Clinton adopted a new defense policy and force structure following the Pentagon's Bottom-Up Review (BUR). The Clinton Administration's defense budget, however, does not provide enough funding to support the force structure recommended in the BUR. The White House states that because the Defense authorization bill provides almost \$7 billion more in funding

for defense than the President requested, he is opposed to it. But all Congress has done is attempt to fund the Clinton Administration's own defense program. A presidential veto would mean that, in effect, the Clinton Administration is disowning its long-range defense program.

✓ **Modernizes the force.** President Clinton has stated on a number of occasions that he wants to maintain the technological superiority enjoyed by the U.S. military at the time he entered office. But the defense procurement account, which is the primary account for providing modern weapons to the military, has fallen by more than two thirds since 1985. Whereas procurement funding consumed almost 34 percent of the Pentagon's budget in fiscal 1985, by fiscal 1995 it had fallen to 17 percent. Most of the congressional add-ons go to the procurement account. Congress believes that cutting procurement too fast will erode the nation's superiority in military technology. A presidential veto would mean that the President has decided to fritter away this technological edge.

✓ **Defends America.** The most outrageous complaint leveled by the White House at the Department of Defense authorization bill is the objection against the bill's provision to deploy a national missile defense system. President Clinton has ordered 20,000 troops to Bosnia because it supposedly serves the national interest. At the same time, the Clinton Administration has stated that a national missile defense system will not serve the national interest. The President apparently sees a national interest in sending U.S. troops to a conduct a dubious mission in remote Bosnia but cannot see one in defending the American people here at home against missile attack. This defies logic and common sense. It also is morally irresponsible. Why should the lives and security of Bosnians be more precious than those of Americans?

The White House states further that a decision to deploy a missile defense system will jeopardize the reduction of nuclear forces in Russia. Its argument: Deploying defenses supposedly will cause the Russian Duma to deny ratification of the 1993 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II (START II). START II would reduce U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals each to 3,500 warheads. The U.S. Senate is likely to approve ratification of the treaty in the coming days or weeks.

The likelihood of approval of START II by the Russian Duma is indeed remote. But this dismal outlook for START II has little to do with a decision by the U.S. Congress to deploy missile defenses and everything to do with a view popular in the Duma, especially in the aftermath of recent elections under the sway of Communists and nationalists, that the Russian nuclear force is a useful tool for coercing other nations, including the U.S. By what twisted logic can someone blame the U.S. Congress for the demise of START II in the Russian Duma? Anyone familiar with Russian politics knows that the Communists, nationalists, and military-industrial complex oppose START II because they want to keep Russia's strategic arsenal strong, not because they feel threatened by America's desire to defend itself against Russian missiles.



In national security policy, a President must mean what he says. Bill Clinton claims to support U.S. troops in Bosnia, but his threat to veto the Defense authorization bill belies his professed regard for their well-being and their purpose. He says he supports increases in military pay and benefits, but a veto of the DOD bill would deny the troops these increases. The White House pretends to have a long-range defense plan—its much-ballyhooed Bottom-Up Review—but a defense veto would make it all but impossible to fund the President's own program. Clinton insists that he wants to preserve America's lead in military technology, but his draconian cuts in military procurement would devastate the military's ability to stay on the cutting edge of technology. Finally, the President has declared his intention to protect the vital national interests of the U.S., but he would veto a bill that attempts to protect the American people against the growing possibility of missile attack.

The President's actions speak louder than words. His promises have proven to be empty. It is time for Bill Clinton to make good on his promises, and his words, by signing the Department of Defense authorization bill.

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