

National Defense Strategy vs. Funding Disconnect: I Think I Can, I Think I Can't, I Know I Can't

Congressman James V. Hansen (R-Utah)

THE PROBLEM

Throughout this decade there has developed a widening disconnect between what we expect our national defense forces to do, and the resources supplied to accomplish those missions. The effects of this rift are now apparent, and will have profound consequences for American national security in the 21st Century. But, before I start into the esoteric language of national defense with its myriad acronyms and colloquial terms, I must build a groundwork for common understanding.

When I was a boy, I learned most of the great lessons of life through parables and stories. One of my favorites was the story of "The Little Engine That Could." Even though faced with great challenges, that courageous little engine, determined to accomplish his essential mission, just persevered until he finally succeeded in pulling his cargo up the mountain. But what if the circumstances had been different? What if the following had happened instead?

When the Little Engine Railroad Company built its line to the city over the mountain, unwisely, the company executives established two construction companies to lay the track. One was to construct the right rail and the other, the left. When the contracts were drawn, the right rail contractor was instructed to build its rail by the most direct route up the mountain to the city. The contract governing construction of the left rail did not mention the destination. Rather, to promote maximum economy, this second contract emphasized that the cost was to be capped at a steadily decreasing rate for each mile laid. When the job was completed, the right rail with its trestles and tunnels, was expensive, but took the most direct course. The left rail smoothly ran over the flat plains until it just ended amid abandoned equipment. All the courage and perseverance in the world could not keep the train on that track. So, as the rails diverged, the little engine was heard to say, I think I can, I think I can t, I know I can't!

HISTORY

In 1993, the new Clinton administration was determined to harvest the "peace dividend" that the end of the Cold War

promised. John Correll, in his editorial in the October 1999 *Air Force Magazine* explains the flow of events. The new Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, seeking to build a force considerably smaller than that which had just won the Gulf War, proposed a national military strategy then called "Win-Hold-Win." This strategy proposed a military force just large enough to fight a medium-sized war (Desert Storm), while holding the line on a second aggressor elsewhere in the world (the Korean Peninsula). That force would then be "swung" following victory in the first theater, to the second, to counter-attack and win. This strategy assumed that any second adversary would take many months to first recognize that America was fully engaged, then mobilize its forces to take advantage of U.S. preoccupation.

Secretary Aspin was experienced with the details of military policy, having most recently served as Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, but even he was surprised by the chorus of condemnation aimed at Win-Hold-Win. Opposition was widespread and came from all directions: foreign and domestic, Democrat and Republican. Virtually every defense expert was—rightly—unwilling to bet America's future security on the hope that our potential enemies would not be ready to take advantage of a fleeting opportunity.

Still, the Secretary had his marching orders from the Clinton White House. His "allowance" for the military was set, and it was not enough to maintain the steady, draw-down glidepath begun by the Bush administration. Mr. Aspin and his staff had a problem. In response, he directed the Pentagon to conduct the now discredited, Bottom-Up Review. The plain goal (if unstated) of this study was to size the force structure to fit the money allotted by the administration, without regard for the new dangers of the post-Cold War world. This arbitrarily-capped defense funding plan can be likened to the left rail in our new tragedy of the Little Engine.

Meanwhile, having failed to persuade legitimate military and foreign policy experts that Win-Hold-Win was not really just "Win-Lose-Lose," the Secretary then settled on a strategy to prepare for two nearly simultaneous Major Regional Conflicts (MRC). This plan, which called for enough forces to fight two wars at once, while air and sea lift assets would swing to supply both theaters, met with qualified approval.

To extend the train analogy, “two MRC” represents the right rail designed to tackle the mountain head-on.

These two rails, strategy and resources, started to diverge only months after Secretary Aspin first declared the “two MRC” national military strategy. Then Aspin announced that, incredibly, the right force structure required to meet two MRC’s was just “Win-Hold-Win” plus only two army divisions. This plan also just happened to stay within his budget allowance.

THE SOUND OF A TRAIN WRECK IN SLOW MOTION

Uniformed military men and women were incredulous, but characteristically stoic. After all, they were members of the executive branch of government, sworn to defend the Constitution and respect the President as Commander-in-Chief and their superior in the chain of command. You did not hear them saying “I think I can, I think I can,” but that’s what they surely meant when they repeatedly said “we are doing more with less.” Our military leaders continued to salute smartly when the President ordered them out into a post-Cold War world that was not as peaceful as the already-spent peace dividend had promised. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and scores of smaller deployments followed. In fact, while the military budget was cut nearly 40 percent, the number of overseas deployments rose about 400 percent. More and more of us began to see that the train was coming off the tracks.

Predictably, the rank and file soldier, sailor, airman and marine began to chafe at the high operational tempo. Many were spending more than 200 days a year separated from spouse and children, year after year, in murky engagements with murkier exit strategies. Reports of increases in military spouse and child abuse as well as climbing divorce rates inexorably began to surface. Soon, word of deteriorating conditions in the military got out. Career servicemen and women, historically our best recruiters, were advising their children, siblings and friends to avoid military service. Recruiting success declined drastically. In 1998, Army quotas were short by more than 7,000 soldiers in a single year, and the Air Force failed to reach its goals for the first time in nearly 30 years. With its 12,000 man shortage, the Navy recently lowered its entrance standards and stopped discharging overweight and misbehaving sailors just to keep afloat. A recent survey published in the October 4th edition of the *Navy Times* reported that startlingly high percentages of enlisted servicemen had had enough, and were getting out — 48 percent in the Marine Corps, 55 percent for the Army, 70 percent in the Air Force, and 75 percent in the Navy!

Perhaps just as alarming, equipment readiness indicators began to drop. Air Force mission capable rates for fighter aircraft fell below their minimum allowable levels, with the non-mission capable rate for F-16 fighters doubling. More than

half of all B-1 bombers could not take off for lack of spare parts. As the March 8, 1999 edition of *Aviation Week and Space Technology* reported, the Navy’s famous Top Gun training unit could only generate 6 of the required 15 F-18 sorties, and 1 or 2 of the 4 F-14 sorties required to train aviators prior to deployment — all for a lack of spare engines and avionics parts. Crash rates for single engine F-16’s, like those flown at Utah’s Hill Air Force Base, rapidly rose to 5 times the historic trend.

Meanwhile, the President has continued to task an already over-tasked military — effectively accelerating the train toward the split in the tracks. After cruise missile attacks against Afghan terrorists, Iraqi weaponeers, and Balkan thugs, the supply of munitions in our stockpile reached critically low levels. Due to frequent use of President Clinton’s weapon of choice, we now have fewer Air Launched Cruise Missiles than we have bombers to launch them. Tomahawk cruise missile stockpiles got so low that regional commanders were raiding each other’s war reserve supplies to meet their daily tasking. For the first time since the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy was forced to leave the entire Pacific Ocean unguarded by a carrier battle group while it strained to cover simultaneous conflicts in Iraq and Kosovo. Under “two MRC,” the U.S. is supposed to be able to fight two wars nearly simultaneously, yet we are unable to maintain even mere presence in the world while *none* of the President’s current engagements qualified as a Major Regional Conflict!

DEALING WITH THE DISCONNECT

Citing these alarming readiness trends, we in the Congress took notice. For years the military service chiefs toed the administration line. “All of our requirements are met by the President’s budget,” they repeatedly testified. It was apparently lost on them that the same Constitution that placed the President over them as Commander-in-Chief, also placed the responsibility to “raise and support Armies” and to “provide and maintain a Navy” squarely on Congress. Fortunately, and to the credit of a handful of brave officers, this tune has begun to change. Only by 1998 did the Joint Chiefs of Staff finally begin to admit the disparity between the stated strategy and fiscal pressure — even if obliquely.

At first the code words were difficult to recognize. The line changed to “all of our essential requirements are met by the President’s budget,” then, most recently, to “all of our most critical, essential requirements are met.” Statements about readiness to conduct both MRC’s, likewise, have started to hint at the danger. In the past 18 months, the Joint Chiefs’ assessment of risk for that second conflict has gone from “high” to “very high” — a military diplomatic euphemism for impossible.

We, in Congress, began to authorize and fund many of the Service Chiefs’ (oxymoronic) “nonessential requirements.” Predictably, the press and the President then

pounced on Congress for forcing funding on the military that they “did not ask for.” They did, of course, ask for this spending privately, and those requests have become desperate pleas.

Congressional efforts were frantic attempts to bend the rails back to parallel. Many were too busy bending to notice that the track was no longer heading up the mountain. The administration’s new idea for helping to deal with the divergence is a retreat to what has always been a bad idea, Win-Hold-Win (known, discreetly, in Pentagon circles as “Win-Hold-Oops”).

THE SOLUTION

We are faced with a choice: Climb the mountain, or give up. Being genuinely prepared to fight two major wars is the right strategy for the United States, and the only viable choice for the only global superpower. As we have seen, world hot spots may require resources over and above those needed even for two MRC’s. Recent operations in Kosovo (not an MRC) required the attention of nearly 75 percent of the entire Air Force. The new investment necessary to properly resource this strategy must be a national priority. During Congressional hearings this year, each of the military service chiefs finally confessed to a serious shortfall in funding, \$23 billion this year alone. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff testified to a shortfall of over \$150 billion in the next 6 years. Congress asked them, on the spot, to put it in writing.

Even by Washington standards, \$23 billion is a lot of money. Where can we hope to find it? The clues can be found in the historical tables of the President’s budget for the year 2000.

Since 1962, the percentage of government funds actually under the control of Congress, so-called discretionary funds, has shriveled from 67.5 percent to only 33.7 percent. The rest of the revenue is spent in non-discretionary, or entitlement, accounts that include interest on the debt, Social Security, Medicare and a host of other programs. The percentage of total outlays spent on national defense has declined over the same period from 49.2 percent to just 16.1 percent. National defense, and all other discretionary spending, is being steadily squeezed out by exploding non-discretionary, entitlement spending.

Looking at national defense spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) also proves instructive. In 1962, national defense accounted for 9.3 percent of GDP. Today, that figure is 3.2 percent and forecast to drop to 2.9 percent by 2001, the lowest level since before Pearl Harbor. Even during the “hollow force” days of the Carter administration, Americans invested 4.7 percent of GDP in defense. Of course, in the 1970’s, the U.S. faced the Soviet Bloc in the Cold War. I agree that we should have reduced, and did reduce our military force from the Cold War high. Today’s military is about 40 percent smaller than it was at the height of the Cold War when America spent 6.1 percent of GDP. A

spending level commensurate with that 40 percent reduction, or approximately 3.7 percent of GDP, would be a good starting point. This half a percent increase over the current level of 3.2 percent of GDP would add \$43 billion dollars for defense investment — enough to cover all of the Joint Chiefs’ unfunded requirements and substantially improve military pay, healthcare and quality of life.

This new investment should focus on today’s readiness first and tomorrow’s preparedness second. As anyone knows, the only way out of a hole is to first stop digging. Pay raises targeted at our enlisted ranks to end reliance on food stamps and close the military-civilian pay gap, restoration of our commitment to quality and accessible health care for military families and retirees, and reinvestment in safe and adequate military housing will send an unmistakable message of support to the men and women who sacrifice so much in our nation’s uniform. Likewise, replenishment of the accounts that pay for spare parts, maintenance, training and flying hours must be a top priority. No amount of patriotism will keep a pilot in uniform if his plane never leaves the ground. Finally, recapitalization of aging equipment and investment in new technology is the prescription for ensuring American security. We should not ask our pilots to fly their father’s airplane and our Marines to drive their grandfather’s truck. Current Air Force plans will fly the B-52 bomber for 90 years, while the Army still drives trucks driven in Vietnam. Even as replacements for these backbone systems must be fielded, new threats will require new capabilities. Ballistic-missile defense, protection against the threat of chemical or biological warfare, and information security are just a few of the challenges that will face us in the coming years.

Arresting the entitlement explosion by paying off the debt to save interest payments, and reforming the Social Security and government health care systems, would free the billions of dollars needed to fully fund this readiness and modernization effort. In 1999, interest payments on the national debt consumed nearly 15 percent of all federal spending. In 1998 we actually spent more on debt servicing than on the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps combined! Similarly, Social Security, Medicare and other entitlement spending has ballooned from 26 percent of federal spending in 1962 to over 55 percent today.

CONCLUSION

The divergence of national strategy and the resources dedicated to achieving those goals presents a worsening danger for America and values we hold dear. Allowing the squeezed, discretionary budget to drive the future direction of military force structure is a grave mistake. Just as the little engine from the story was not free to choose the destination or the steepness of the track, the only responsible policy is to set national defense spending levels predicated on the threat we face. The threats we face today, while different in many ways from those we faced during the Cold War, are no less dan-

gerous or numerous. Regional instability, rogue regimes, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and international terrorism each require our attention and a new investment. The time to prepare is now. I think we can and I know we must.