

Americans reject Bush defense plan

by Leo F. Scanlon

Despite years of anti-defense propaganda from the White House, Congress, and the news media, a recently released poll confirms that over 80% of Americans believe that current defense spending is either "just about right" or "not strong enough." Perhaps to the surprise of the pollsters, only 8% of those polled said that the United States should cut its military presence in Europe at this time, and 90% said that the U.S. should either "wait and see" about the outcome of the promised Soviet reforms, or should simply "rule out cuts all together."

The poll results, reported by Paul Nisbet, a senior analyst with Prudential Bache, contradict all the pundits who have been fraudulently reporting that a wave of isolationism is sweeping the U.S. in the wake of Gorbachov's reforms and the political upheaval in Eastern Europe. More fundamentally, the polls reveal the lack popular support for Bush administration policies, which other polls have been manipulated to conceal.

Opinion research organizations showed similar attitudes in the period before the last two summits, illustrating that the administration's "Gorbymania" has not been echoed by the citizens. Now that the Bush administration has admitted that the mass layoffs and economic devastation wrought by the first round of defense cuts will be followed by deeper reductions and higher taxes, the stage is set for the Congress to walk into a political buzzsaw during the upcoming campaign period.

Budget cuts presage economic crisis

The cycle of defense budget cuts followed by further demands for overall budget savings is beginning to look like a runaway train, despite administration efforts to maintain the facade of control over the process.

On June 19, Defense Secretary Richard Cheney made public the contents of a study done for the White House-Congress budget summit, which illustrated the effects of different levels of defense budget cuts proposed by the summitters. The administration proposal, aimed at savings of 10%, would cut 10 Army divisions, five strategic bomber squadrons, two aircraft carriers and associated battle groups, 11 Air Force wings, two Navy air wings, 50% of the Minuteman missiles, almost 20% of Poseidon-Trident missiles, nearly 25% of total naval vessels, some 442,000 active duty military personnel, and 260,000 from the Guard and Reserves. This represents a drop in force structure of 25%.

Cheney told the horror story in the hopes of holding off Senate budget cuts which would produce a 35% cut in forces, and a draconian policy proposed by the House Armed Services Committee which would cut forces by 50%, requiring the military to close one-third to half of all military bases worldwide. No sooner had Cheney presented his "worst case scenario" than the President announced a new round of tax hikes and budget cuts.

The cuts endorsed by the House and Senate Budget Committees have unleashed an economic crisis in the defense industry. The situation has become so severe that the Air Force has begun pointing to the precarious financial position of McDonnell Douglas, prime contractor on the C-17 transport, to illustrate the danger of the present course. The plans to cut production of the C-17 ignore the fact that McDonnell Douglas is over \$1.5 billion in debt, partly because of its \$400 million investment in the program, according to Air Force acquisition chief Maj. Gen. Steve Croker. He told the Senate Armed Services Committee that eliminating the 1991 purchase of the C-17 would "drive McDonnell Douglas to make those same dollars on fewer aircraft to repay those loans, perhaps increasing the aircraft's cost."

In fact, McDonnell Douglas has already begun a shut-down of its St. Louis operations in order to improve "profitability" and assuage its creditors. The layoffs, which could reach more than 7,000 in St. Louis alone, will push the unemployment in the metropolitan area above 6% according to Missouri officials, and studies indicate that about 80,000 jobs in Missouri ultimately could be at risk from budget cuts currently planned.

The devastation caused by this approach to the economy is being repeated in dozens of areas around the country, as small engineering shops and manufacturing facilities are shutting down production lines built to supply the major weapons producers. This in turn drives up the cost of every nut and bolt in every weapons system, and scatters to the wind the teams of engineers and skilled workers essential to maintain production. In short, the Bush budget is destabilizing the infrastructure of the manufacturing sector of the American economy.

The folly of attempting to run the Defense Department on the basis of a collapsing economic base has provoked chaos in the office of the Secretary of Defense. Cheney has attempted to rationalize the cuts by conducting "reviews" which allegedly balance budget considerations against strategic military needs. One plan for cutbacks in acquisition of major aircraft systems was publicly mocked by a leak which exposed the fact that the Navy had withheld significant factual information bearing on the potential costs of their advanced fighter program.

The C-17 cuts are based on a similar "review" which justifies reduced need for strategic lift capabilities. According to a staffer in the Office of the Secretary, the only analysis offered to support the cuts was "just a bunch vu-graphs."