

An American 'Hollow Military'? Blame Cheney

by Carl Osgood

In his acceptance speech at the 2000 Republican National Convention, Vice-Presidential nominee Dick Cheney declared, "For eight years, Clinton and Gore have extended our military commitments while depleting our military power. Rarely had so much been demanded of our Armed Forces and so little given to them in return. . . . I have seen our military at its finest, with the best equipment, the best training, and the best leadership. I am proud of them. I have had the responsibility for their well-being. And I can promise them, help is on the way."

The idea that the Bush-Cheney ticket was going to rescue the U.S. military from the paucity of eight years of the Clinton-Gore Administration, became a rallying cry for conservative Republicans in the 2000 campaign, and even gained the ticket the endorsement of a group of retired generals. However, a quick review of the historical record shows that President Clinton largely continued a policy that had been set into motion by the administration that preceded his, a policy which Cheney himself played a key role in establishing and implementing.

As Secretary of Defense in the George H. W. Bush Administration, Cheney pursued an aggressive policy of budget cuts and force reductions, even as the administration waged wars against Panama and Iraq. While the base closure law had been enacted in 1988 (it, too, was written by Republicans—two then-little known representatives, Richard K. Armey of Texas and John Kasich of Ohio, along with William Dickinson, Republican of Alabama, a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee—and the Democratic chairman of that committee, Les Aspin of Wisconsin), Cheney enthusiastically

carried out its provisions. The Democrats then in control of the Congress were concerned that Cheney was slashing perhaps a little too fast, and amended the 1988 base closure law in 1990 in an attempt to slow down the process just a little, but it appears to have had little effect.

When Cheney submitted his first defense budget, in 1989, he was already calling for reducing the top line in the last Reagan Administration five-year defense plan by \$65 billion, said to be made possible by the changes then ongoing in the Soviet Union. One year later, Cheney was seeking to slash another \$167 billion for a total of \$232 billion. As he told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Feb. 1, 1990, his goal was a minus 2% real growth rate (when adjusted for inflation) in the defense budget over 1991-1995. Cheney projected that, looking over the period 1986 to 1995, the administration's actual proposed budgets would end up \$515 billion below the level required to maintain a zero growth rate, or a real decline of 22% over the ten-year period. All of this was premised on the continued collapse of the Soviet Union, the successful completion of arms reduction talks, and "no unforeseen, extended commitments for U.S. forces."

Huge Cuts in Personnel, Force Structure

Such budget slashing, of course, meant huge reductions in personnel strengths and force structure of the military services. "Taking down force structure," Cheney had said in his 1990 testimony, "is absolutely essential if we want to preserve the quality of what is left." Cheney had already targetted two Army divisions; two battleships, two nuclear-powered cruisers, and eight submarines of the Navy; and 14 Air Force B-52s, the entire Minuteman II missile fleet, and the Air Force's fleet of WC-130 weather reconnaissance aircraft, as well as 14 batteries of Marine Corps artillery, for de-activation. Cheney's plan called for cutting the services by 25% by 1995, a plan which was endorsed by President Bush in a speech to the Aspen Institute in Colorado on Aug. 2, 1990, the same day that Iraq invaded Kuwait, touching off the 1990-91 Persian Gulf crisis.

The reduction of the services proceeded as outlined by Cheney, with Congressional encouragement. In 1989, the services were authorized a total strength of 2,137,000, including 771,800 for the Army, 593,200 for the Navy, 197,200 for the Marine Corps, and 575,100 for the Air Force. In 1992, the total authorized strength had dropped to 1,766,500, a reduction of 17%. That decline continued after Bill Clinton became President in 1993 to 1,447,540 in 1997, an overall decline from 1989 of 32%. Today, the total authorized strength is approximately 1.3 million, with the present George W. Bush Administration resisting all calls for an increase in military personnel, despite the fact that one-third of the Army's combat strength is deployed in Iraq. The personnel reduction accompanied a comparable reduction in force structure. The Army went from 18 divisions in 1989 to 10, today. During the same period, the Navy went from

546 ships to 290, and the Air Force went from 41 combat wings to 23.

Evidence of the stress on military personnel, is the Army's resort to "stop-loss" to prevent soldiers from separating at the end of their enlistments, or retiring, because the Army does not have enough people for all of the missions that are being demanded of it, especially in Iraq. As a result of stop-loss, which some have criticized as an unheralded, unannounced draft, the Army is some 20,000 soldiers over its authorized strength of 480,000. Stop-loss authority was first granted by Congress during the Vietnam War, but was not used until 1990, when Cheney allowed the services to bar retirements and prolong enlistments indefinitely after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The 'Procurement Holiday'

The force structure changes were accompanied by the cancellation of many procurement programs and the reduction of others and a greater emphasis on strategic nuclear forces. Cheney stopped production of the M1 tank, the F-15E fighter aircraft, among others, and cancelled numerous upgrade programs for existing weapons systems. He cancelled the Navy's A-12 attack bomber, and tried to kill the V-22 tilt-rotor aircraft. The combined result of the cancellations and the budget cuts was the infamous "procurement holiday" of the mid-1990s, during which procurement levels fell well below those required to simply replace existing equipment. One result of the drop in procurement is that, today, the Army's M1 tanks are driving around on engines that are 12-20 years old. And, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld cancelled the Army's program to replace the old engines with new, more reliable engines, showing, perhaps, that the mentality of the present administration has not changed, despite the fact that defense budgets are now growing.

While the Soviet Union did, indeed, disappear from the world stage, Cheney's premise of "no unforeseen, extended commitments for U.S. forces" did not come true. Cheney personally was secretly promoting a new global imperial war policy, backed up by nuclear weapons, while he was Secretary of Defense (fortunately rejected by the Bush 41 Administration). Only months after the 1991 Persian Gulf War was concluded, war was unleashed in the Balkans and left for President Clinton to deal with. In 1993, Harvard Prof. Samuel Huntington put forward his "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, to replace the ideological conflict of the Cold War. So, not only were the U.S. military services being drastically cut, but also the conditions were already being created which led to a massive increase in military deployments and operational tempo throughout the 1990s—all of which was conveniently blamed on the Clinton Administration. Today, the U.S. military is in the position of carrying out Vice President Cheney's imperial war policy with a much reduced personnel strength and force structure, which is the result of the policies set into motion by Cheney himself.