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# The Phony Defense Budget War

*While the Bush administration and Congress fiddle, the Pentagon burns.*

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BY GARY SCHMITT  
& TOM DONNELLY

**L**ast Wednesday, in testimony before the Senate Appropriations defense subcommittee, Defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld fired the latest salvo in his campaign to recast American defense strategy and to rescue the fading hopes for this year's Pentagon budget. But Rumsfeld's campaign is less *blitzkrieg* than *sitzkrieg*—a “phony war” on behalf of an already inadequate \$18 billion increase over Bill Clinton's last planned defense budget. Whatever the outcome of the skirmishing in Congress over the next few weeks—whether an increase of, say, \$10 billion or the full \$18 billion—the result will be far less than is needed to fix the many problems besetting the American military.

On behalf of his \$18 billion, Rumsfeld was eloquent: “We need every nickel of it,” he told the subcommittee, “not only [to] begin to repair the damage done by a long period of under-funding . . . [but to] lay the foundation for the effort to transform our armed forces for the 21st century.”

What makes Rumsfeld's appeal ring hollow, however, is the fact that he has yet to convince his commander in chief of any pressing need. Since early February, when spokesman Ari Fleischer boasted that the Bush administration was not going to “throw money in the direction of defense,” it has been abundantly clear that the president and his political advisers considered their tax cut to have far higher priority than defense. Ever since, the Pentagon has been in retreat.

Thus, after initial studies, Rumsfeld concluded that the 2002 defense budget needed to be raised by an additional \$36 billion. On advice from the Office of Management and Budget, the president agreed to just half that

request. Then the Democrats won control of the Senate, the tax cut and the economic downturn combined to reduce federal budget surpluses, and many congressional Republicans—especially the leadership—again proved themselves to be budget hawks first. Rep. Jim Nussle, the Republican chairman of the House Budget Committee, has even turned the administration's early excuse for not seeking a serious supplemental increase this year back against it: “I am very concerned about the fiscal responsibility behind continuing to fund the defense of the past,” he recently said.

But the facts of the case show that current spending is inadequate to support today's force, let alone any “transformed” force of the future. In their preparatory work for the Quadrennial Defense Review, Clinton officials estimated that the Defense Department might need as much as an extra \$50 billion per year. Even this figure was among the lowest estimates of the “strategy-resources” gap. Analyses by the Congressional Budget Office, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Brookings Institution, and others reported similar or even higher figures. The outgoing secretary of the Air Force pegged the gap at \$100 billion. And none of these estimates included new Bush administration priorities, such as conventional-force transformation or a global missile defense system.

In sum, the price tag for any realistic program to rebuild and reform the U.S. military is well beyond the marginal sums the administration and the Congress are now fighting over. While Rumsfeld has been touting the Bush defense request as “the largest increase in defense spending since the mid-1980s,” he simultaneously acknowledges that “this budget won't get us out of the hole we are in.” Especially since next year's budget may barely keep pace with inflation.

Given this, Rumsfeld has only two fundamental choices: (1) make cuts in current force structure to pay for modernization in the near term and transformation for the

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longer term, or (2) maintain current forces while continuing the weapons “procurement holiday” of the past decade and deferring any real transformation.

Initially, it seemed that Rumsfeld would choose the force-cut option. Many of Bush’s defense and national security aides believed that high-technology “transformation” was the silver bullet that would restore American military strength at a relatively low cost, and that the end of the Cold War had ushered in a “strategic pause” where there would be no great-power competitor to the United States. It would be logical, they reasoned, to take a little more risk today to prepare for or deter a bigger threat tomorrow.

Thus, as recently as six weeks ago, press reports suggested that Rumsfeld might reduce the Army by two active-duty divisions, the Air Force by two dozen squadrons, and the Navy by a carrier group or two. The administration also believed it could mitigate the risks of force cuts by abandoning the Clinton policy of “engagement” that has resulted in the proliferation of peacekeeping and other constabulary missions of recent years—Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, but especially the Balkans and the no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq.

But the logic of American global military commitments has quieted most talk of force cuts. The Bush administration has backed away from its hope to be able to reduce these commitments appreciably. The fact is that, after a decade of post-Cold War experience, through administrations of both parties, these commitments have become an essential expression of America’s role as sole superpower.

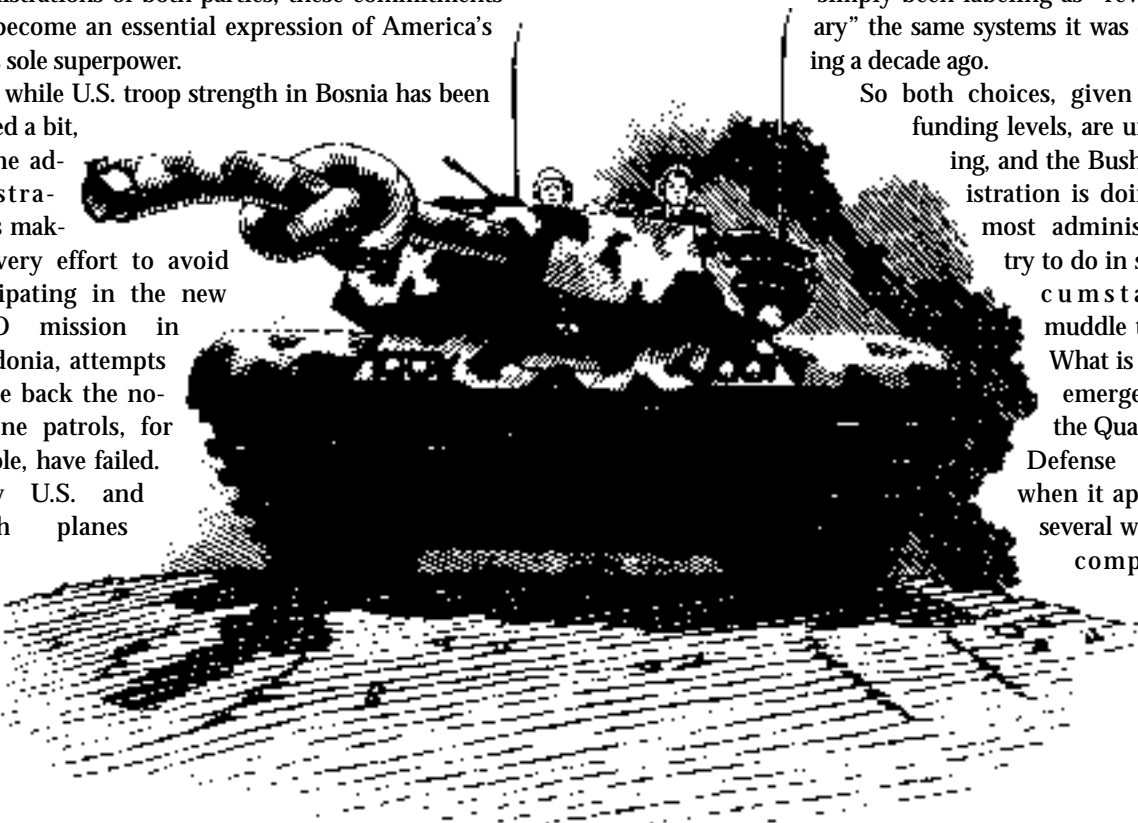
So while U.S. troop strength in Bosnia has been reduced a bit, and the administration is making every effort to avoid participating in the new NATO mission in Macedonia, attempts to pare back the no-fly zone patrols, for example, have failed. Lately U.S. and British planes have

been bombing Iraq as frequently as ever, responding to the increased threat from Saddam Hussein’s air defenses. Rumsfeld has been frustrated even in his attempt to pare back the long-running mission in the Sinai—“The place could be protected by a terrier,” he says, “and Colin Powell agrees.” Not surprisingly, given the low-level but angry war now being waged in the Middle East, a withdrawal of American troops from the Sinai seems imprudent. So as the realities of America’s role in the world have sunk in, the enthusiasm for deep force cuts has cooled considerably.

But the second choice—deal just with today’s needs while postponing investments for tomorrow—is equally unpalatable. “We’ve been living off the investments of the 1980s for too long,” complains Rumsfeld. He’s right. Over the past decade, hundreds of billions of dollars in weapons research and procurement has been deferred. The average age of U.S. military aircraft will soon exceed 30 years. The Navy shipbuilding rate is so anemic that the fleet will soon be just 300 ships, less than half the size of the Reagan years. The Army’s tanks and infantry vehicles are reaching 20 years of age, with no replacements on the books.

The challenge of transformation is real. “The proliferation of weapons with increasing range and power into the hands of multiple potential adversaries means that the coming years will see an expansion of risks” to American cities, warns Rumsfeld. Innovation in the armed forces has been dangerously shortchanged; the Pentagon has simply been labeling as “revolutionary” the same systems it was developing a decade ago.

So both choices, given current funding levels, are unappealing, and the Bush administration is doing what most administrations try to do in such circumstances: muddle through. What is likely to emerge from the Quadrennial Defense Review when it appears in several weeks is a compromise



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solution, featuring just a few force cuts and a considerably less-than-advertised transformation, all of this glossed over with a variety of “efficiency” initiatives, high-sounding rhetoric, and smoke and mirrors. In other words, the Bush administration’s defense strategy—or its lack thereof—will be a continuation of Bill Clinton’s.

**I**n only one way will the Bush defense review depart from Clinton policies: It will renounce the “two-war” standard that has been the basis of post-Cold War U.S. defense planning and the stable measure of American power. The fundamental tenet of this standard is that U.S. forces should be sufficient to fight and win two “major theater wars”—like the 1991 Gulf War—at once. Anything less has been regarded as inadequate to maintain global military pre-eminence, thus inviting adversaries to cause trouble and allies to doubt us. This is why Colin Powell contended in 1992 that a two-war capability was the minimum needed for American strength and credibility. It was, he said, a sign saying “Superpower lives here.”

The Rumsfeld one-and-a-half-war approach, and President Bush’s decision not to increase defense spending significantly, will have real effects on American foreign and security policy. Reluctance to support NATO operations in Macedonia is just the tip of the iceberg. NATO countries already have been spooked by reports that the Rumsfeld review would recommend cuts in the U.S. garrison in Europe.

Although the cuts will likely be masked as reductions in headquarters “tail” to preserve combat “tooth,” they are certain to be read as a lessening of American commitment to European security. This, in turn, will complicate efforts to expand NATO, deal with Russia on security issues, and ensure that any common European defense policy remains firmly linked to NATO and to the United States.

There will be consequences for U.S. policy in the Middle East as well. While Israel can, for the moment at least, take care of itself (and in fact the administration has been wisely allowing it to do so), the long-term American role in the Persian Gulf has been an unanswered question through the Clinton years. The Bush administration has promised to take a harder line against Saddam Hussein, conducting a lengthy review that has flirted with the option of going beyond containment to overthrow of the

Iraqi regime. But without sufficient military force to ensure Iraq’s defeat and occupation, that option will be off the table.

The administration has rightly placed a new emphasis on East Asia. While it hasn’t worked through exactly how to deal with China—and the tensions between American trade and security interests in the region remain unresolved—the administration deserves high marks for moving to strengthen and expand U.S. alliances, especially its little-remarked opening to India. But until there are new military realities to match this farsighted rhetoric, these words ring hollow, too.

In continuing Clinton-era policies, President Bush is retreating from the post-Cold War standards set forth by his father. In 1992, the first Bush administration called for an active force of 1.6 million in 12 Army divisions, 20 Air Force wings, 12 Navy carrier groups, and so on. While Rumsfeld has yet to decide on the final details of the future force, it might well have just 1.3 million men and women on active duty and as few as 8 or 9 Army divisions, 11 to 12 Air Force wings, and 10 carrier groups. At the same time, the promise of conventional-force transformation, global missile defenses protecting America and its allies, and control of space will be deferred until the distant future.

President Bush came to office with an extraordinary opportunity to rebuild and reform the U.S. armed forces and to preserve the peace of the post-Cold War years. If he had made a defense build-up a priority, he would

have found plenty of support in Congress. Instead, on his watch, the situation is getting worse. As Rumsfeld himself recently said, “Each year we put off these critical investments, each year we kick the can down the road, we are digging ourselves deeper and deeper in the hole.” He continued: “It’s like having a credit card. If you pay only the minimum every month, the interest will accumulate and the cost of digging out of debt gets bigger and bigger.”

Because no real solution to our defense needs is possible without significantly increased spending, the phony war over the 2002 defense budget represents another chapter in the saga of all relevant parties’—the president and the Congress, Republicans and Democrats—irresponsibly kicking the can down the road. A pretty disgraceful performance all around, but particularly disappointing for an administration that assured us help was on the way. ♦

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