

Pentagon brass at Senate hearing

US military demands spending increase

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At an acrimonious hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee September 29, the top American generals began an unprecedented public campaign for a substantial increase in military spending, above and beyond that already requested by the Clinton administration.

General Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the heads of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines told the Senate panel that shortages of manpower and equipment were causing readiness to 'nose dive,' especially in critical areas like the Persian Gulf and the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea.

Shelton testified, 'Current readiness is fraying and the long-term health of the total force is in jeopardy. He said that as a result of greater than expected deployment overseas--especially in the Persian Gulf--American military forces 'are showing increasing signs of serious wear.'

The military commanders said that a scaled-back retirement system and lagging pay scales, combined with longer overseas deployments which increased stress on military families, were causing an increasing loss of skilled manpower. Only 9 percent of eligible Air Force pilots signed up for a recent reenlistment bonus, for instance. The military retirement system was cut back under the Reagan administration in 1986, with retirement pay reduced from 50 percent of base salary to 40 percent.

Admiral Jay Johnson, the chief of naval operations, said that front-line troops were 'frankly tired of being asked to do more with less.' He pointed to the staggering 82 percent increase in naval aircraft accidents this year as proof that inordinate demands were being made on Navy pilots.

The total number of American military personnel has

fallen to 1.4 million--an enormous number compared to most other countries but the lowest level for the United States since the 1930s. At the same time, more US soldiers are deployed in long-term assignments in overseas combat zones than at any time since the Vietnam War.

Army deployments have tripled under Clinton to an average of 30,000 soldiers posted on six-month overseas missions in 80 countries, with the largest number in Bosnia. Air Force deployments have quintupled, and pilots of F16 fighters, A10 attack planes and U2 spy planes spent an average of 140 days abroad in 1997, most of them in the Persian Gulf. Half of the entire Navy is currently at sea, and only half based in port in the continental United States.

The five top officers complained that the far-flung deployment of American military forces was undermining the Pentagon's current war-fighting doctrine, which calls for maintaining the ability to fight two major wars, on the scale of the Persian Gulf war, at the same time. In such an eventuality, they said, heavy casualties could be expected in the second war. A recent computer simulation resulted in an increase in the estimated risk of the second war from 'moderate' to 'high,' and a projected US casualty toll of 16,000 wounded and an undetermined number of dead.

There is no doubt that the US military is suffering from real strains, as the downsizing which followed the end of the Cold War comes into conflict with the increasing propensity of American imperialism to intervene militarily in strategic areas such as the Persian Gulf, the Balkans and the Far East. For all the squealing from the Pentagon brass, however, US military spending remains at a staggeringly high level--\$270 billion for the past year--and huge sums continue to be expended on such boondoggles as the \$2

billion Trident submarine, the F-22 jet fighter (at \$160 million per plane), M-1 tanks and other Cold War-era weapons.

A notable feature of the Senate hearing was the degree of tension revealed between the Senate Republicans and the military high command. John McCain of Arizona, Robert Smith of New Hampshire and other conservative Republicans criticized the military witnesses over their reversal of position from February, when they told a previous committee hearing that there was no readiness crisis. Smith all but called the officers liars. After Shelton said the Pentagon had not anticipated the cost of the Persian Gulf deployment, McCain said sarcastically, 'Did you think Saddam Hussein was going to join the Boy Scouts?'

Neither the Senate Republicans nor the generals and admirals could discuss openly the real reasons for the shift in the Pentagon's posture and its sudden demand for billions in additional resources. In the period since February two developments in American politics, not foreign policy, have impelled the Pentagon to seek a new spending binge.

The first is the emergence of a relatively large surplus in the federal budget--\$70 billion for the fiscal year which ended September 30--an inviting target for Pentagon planners who have been forced to cut back spending, at least in real terms, for more than a decade. As a consequence of the surplus, the \$270 billion cap on Pentagon spending set under the bipartisan budget agreement will be lifted for the fiscal year 2000 budget which will be submitted to Congress next February. The appearance before the Armed Services Committee was aimed not so much at increasing current spending as preparing for next year's push.

The second and even more significant political development is the crisis of the Clinton administration produced by the Starr investigation, which has emboldened the military brass to virtually bypass the White House in its drive to increase the war budget. The Joint Chiefs met with Secretary of Defense William Cohen to discuss their budgetary demands on September 12, the day that Starr's report was made public by the House Judiciary Committee.

Three days later, Cohen and the Joint Chiefs met with Clinton and quickly obtained his agreement that the administration would seek a supplementary appropriation of between \$1 billion and \$4 billion to

meet the most pressing expenses, mainly those related to Bosnia and the Persian Gulf. The White House has tacitly accepted that its proposed reduction in the military budget from \$270 billion to \$250 billion in 2000 will be reversed, and US military spending will show its first increase in real terms since the Reagan administration.

At a press conference at the time of this meeting, Cohen pointedly refused to make any prediction on Clinton's political survival, only stating that Clinton was still able to exercise the powers of commander-in-chief. It is an open secret that the Starr investigation has rekindled the longstanding resentment within the military brass towards a president who was regarded as a draft dodger, a supporter of homosexual rights, and a hypocrite on the issue of sexual relations with subordinates, for which several top officers have been cashiered or denied promotions.

Clinton's bowing to the demands of the top brass for billions more in military spending demonstrates that one result of the Starr investigation has been the weakening of the constitutional principle of civilian control over the military.



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