

Our Vanishing Military Deterrent

By Gen (Ret) Richard E. Hawley

The so-called baby boomer generation has witnessed a remarkable transformation, and reduction, in the military threat to our nation's security and survival. We have gone from fearing a global nuclear holocaust that threatened to end civilization as we know it, to fearing that a rogue state or terrorist group might sneak a single small nuclear device into one of our major cities. The NATO alliance has been transformed from a huge defensive force guarding against a likely Warsaw Pact invasion from the East, to an expeditionary force dealing with far less serious threats around the periphery of Europe. The threat of a major conventional attack on one of America's key allies has virtually vanished because of our demonstrated ability to quickly crush any such attacker.

The daily drumbeat of news about Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Korea and Palestine; amplified by the 24-hour news cycle, makes it hard to recognize and appreciate how secure we are today relative to the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s. But in fact, America is more secure today than at any time since before the Second World War.

Credit for that happy state of affairs goes to a thoughtful, enduring policy of containment that earned bipartisan political support for more than 40 years; an economy whose growth dwarfed that of the rest of the world; and sustained investment in military capabilities sufficient to deter the threat of nuclear attack by the former Soviet Union, and so superior today as to make the most ambitious of tyrants shrink from the prospect of facing them in a conventional force-on-force battle. The insurgents we fight in Iraq and Afghanistan are dangerous people, but they do not threaten our survival and they can only win if we lose our will.

Unfortunately, our narrow and short-sighted focus on the insurgent threats of today threatens to deprive us of the very capabilities that deny our adversaries the option of engaging in more costly forms of aggression. America's dominance in the air and at sea is vanishing. The very capabilities that gave us this unprecedented level of security are being neglected while political leaders debate the wisdom of continuing the fight in Iraq. Any investment not directly related to that threat is questioned as a legacy of the Cold War. It is not too late to reverse these trends. We can still preserve the conventional military capabilities that have proven so effective in deterring major threats to our security, but the window of opportunity is closing fast.

In 1987, just twenty years ago, we had 393 long-range bombers. Today we have 181. The Air Force fielded 798 air superiority fighters in 1987. Today it has 522. It had 2,235 multi-role and attack fighters. Today it has 1,982. In 1987 the Navy had 15 Aircraft Carrier Battle Groups with 14 air wings and 568 battle force ships; today it has shrunk to 11 Carriers, 10 air wings and 276 battle force ships.

It is not just our forces that are vanishing, but the industrial base that supports them as well. The Air Force budget request for 1987 included funding for 264 combat aircraft. Its request for 2007 included just five. The Navy's 1987 budget funded 17 new battle force ships. The 2007 budget funds seven. If we make the very generous assumption that the average useful life of aircraft is 25 years and of ships 35, sustaining the current force will require production of 90 combat aircraft (bombers and fighters) each year for the Air Force and 7.5 battle force ships for the Navy. And because of the procurement holiday that began in the early '90s, we will have to exceed those rates for many years. Ninety four of those 181 bombers are more than 40 years old and 433 of the Air Force's fighters were built prior to 1982. The budget proposed for 2008 funds 26 Air Force combat aircraft. Every year of such neglect puts us deeper in the hole.

Sustaining our conventional deterrent capabilities will cost a lot of money, especially when we buy them at such low rates of production. But their value as a deterrent to major conventional conflict dwarfs that cost. We have driven the threshold of violence our foes are willing to consider to a relatively low level. We owe it to future generations to preserve the capabilities that made this possible. The Air Force Chief of Staff says his Service needs \$20B a year more than currently programmed to reverse its decline. The Navy probably needs a like amount, and that estimate may actually be too low - for both Services. The Defense Department's budget, not including war supplementals, will have to grow by 8-10% a year and then keep pace with inflation to accommodate these needs.

Federal outlays in 2007 will exceed \$2.7 Trillion. That's \$2,700 Billion! America can afford to spend another \$40-50B a year to keep her sons and daughters from dying in a war that could have been deterred.