The Defense Policy of the Reagan Administration

Since the beginning of the Reagan Administration, we have been hard at work in the Defense Department to prepare a defense program for the President that will respond to the mandate the American people so clearly gave him last November. It is our aim to carry out the pledge Ronald Reagan made: that if elected he would rebuild America's strength. Congress, responsive to this mandate, has given the proposed increase in our defense effort its sympathetic support.

Some of our critics have argued that we are simply spending more money without new concepts or an overall strategic design. I think I know what caused this impression. It was the combination of a sense of urgency and a sense of caution on our part. I am now satisfied that both were required.

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We had no choice but to respond with great urgency to the need to rebuild our military strength. We found that there was literally nothing we did not need. We had to begin at once to improve the readiness of our forces; to start reducing the appalling lack of spare parts, supplies, and munitions; and to make at least a beginning in closing the alarming gap between the Soviet investment in arms and our own. The budget cycle was such that we had only six weeks to construct the new defense budgets for the current and next fiscal year (FY 1981 and 1982) -- a process which normally takes eight months. Thus, we had to accelerate or augment programs that were in being; we had to buy the arms, so to speak, that were in the assembly lines. We had to fund a much needed salary increase which had been voted in November, but the funds were not there to pay it.

Nonetheless, I did cut $3.2 billion from the two budgets we inherited, and I did order some fundamental reviews of specific programs that in my judgment had not been adequately prepared or seemed inconsistent with our aims. As you know, I requested such a review for the choice of a new manned bomber and for the deployment mode of the new land-based missile.

As for caution, we knew little was to be gained by an early enunciation of some elaborate "conceptual structure," a full-fledged Reagan strategy. Too often, in the past, these easy and early pronouncements have caused real harm. They prejudged and oversimplified reality; they put blinders on our vision.

We chose to develop our new defense policy with the care and thought demanded by the seriousness of the threats and tasks confronting us. While we are to some extent prisoners of decisions to buy made long ago, and we thus far must purchase the weapons systems now in the assembly lines, we certainly are not locked into the defense policy of the past Administration. There is a great deal that we are changing.

We are reforming the management of the Defense Department, streamlining the preparation of our budget, and making more efficient the procedures for contracting with industry -- the so-called acquisition process. These innovations I have discussed on other occasions.

Tonight, I want to explore with you some important aspects of policy and strategy. First, people ask, what is our most basic goal? Our goal is to maintain peace with freedom. Peace alone is not enough. In a tortured sort of way, Poland is at peace. We must have freedom with peace.
We must also be clear about some basic facts that guide -- and in a sense constrain -- our defense policy. It has long been the purpose of American military power to be a shield -- providing protection from the aggressive use of force against us, our allies, and our friends. We do not use military power to hold together or to expand an empire. Our strategy, in this sense, has to be reactive. If an aggressor moves first, we must be prepared to strike back if our efforts to deter attacks fail.

From this constraint it follows that we must be prepared to mobilize our forces quickly and to strengthen them in response to warning. This capability has been neglected in recent years and we are taking urgent steps to improve it. We are also pressing ahead to increase the readiness of our forces and our ability to move them rapidly to wherever they may be needed.

Related constraints for our defense policy stem from the fact that we are a democracy. We cannot and should not, be a nation permanently in arms. And we have been reluctant to devote an ever increasing share of our economy to defense. We cannot match the Soviets in number of men at arms in peacetime. And the Soviets may continue to outspend us in acquiring new armaments, even with the vitally needed larger defense budget proposed by this Administration. Should the Soviet Union continue to increase its military budget at the present rate while our defense spending shows a real growth of 7 percent as proposed, we would not completely close the gap in military investment until beyond the year 1987.

Some twenty years ago, it was argued that our nuclear superiority would make it unnecessary for us to fight a prolonged, major conventional war. That was probably true then, but today this argument has lost much of its strength. Yet, while our margin of nuclear superiority disappeared, we neglected to devote the resources required to fight successfully a conventional conflict. During the long war in Vietnam we drew down our stocks of military materiel and have failed to replenish them. Thus, we must set out to improve the sustainability as well as the readiness of our forces.

We also must develop a capability to expand defense production massively in the event of an all-out emergency. The Reagan Administration has stepped-up the filling of our petroleum reserve and has begun to modernize the stockpile of strategic minerals. And we are urgently making preparations for emergency mobilization of industry. The ability of American industry to respond quickly to a defense emergency is highly unsatisfactory today.

We are now spending nearly five times as much for conventional forces as for nuclear forces. Yet, all these preparations for non-nuclear warfare are only half-measures, unless we replenish the stocks that enable our conventional forces to sustain themselves in combat, and unless we improve our industrial capacity to expand defense production in wartime.

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However essential arms and equipment are to conduct the war, the ultimate role is played by those who must fight it. Without first-rate manpower we cannot hope to prevail.

The Reagan Administration believes that our manpower needs can best be met by the All Volunteer Force as it was originally envisioned. It is true that since the inception of the All Volunteer Force, its ability to provide the right number and kinds of people has been hotly debated. But we see the major problems of this Force as arising from the way it has been managed. The original concept provided that military pay and benefits would remain comparable with those of the civilian sector. Nonetheless, a ceiling was put on pay and benefits were allowed to erode.

We plan to adjust military pay and benefits until they become comparable to civilian levels. Initial results indicate that this is the way to go: since the October 1980 pay raise, our recruiting objectives have been met or exceeded in the Active and Reserve components. Furthermore, the quality of our enlistees has substantially improved and our reenlistment rates are dramatically higher.

In addition, we are thinking about an expanded program for educational assistance and incentives somewhat comparable to the famed GI Bill. We believe this will attract more young people of high-aptitude into military service.

These steps will help us to meet, by volunteers, the major manpower needs of the 1980s, even though the pool of young people is diminishing.

I realize that many respected military experts have advocated that the draft be restored. But a draft will not help us retain experienced career personnel — to do this, we must improve pay, benefits, and career mobility. Moreover, conscription raises problems of equity, no matter what selection process we use. At present, even though our manpower pool is growing smaller, we can retain the volunteer concept while we are at peace. But we must develop measures to curb the demand for additional military personnel. One of the most promising approaches here is a greatly increased replacement of military personnel by civilians in all tasks where military training is not essential. We can thus free the military to do military work — to man combat units. Also, we hope to use more women in non-combat jobs, and we are placing much greater emphasis on reenlistments.

You may have noticed that I said, "We can retain the Volunteer concept while we are at peace." If we increase pay and benefits, use military manpower only where it is needed, and restore the honor and gratitude which the American people used to accord those who
served in the Armed Forces, I see no need for a peacetime draft. In the event of an emergency, we would first begin activating the well-trained units of our 800,000 man selected Reserve to fill out our total force structure. If we go into actual combat, initial replacements would come from the 250,000 pre-trained people in the Individual Ready Reserve. This addition of over one million people to our two million man active force should enable us to hold the line until the first conscripts begin arriving on the battlefield.

Because the manpower situation is so important and complex, President Reagan has formed a cabinet level task force on defense manpower, which is considering all of the issues of military personnel, both in peace and war.

On another major policy issue, I have been slightly bemused by the academic debates as to whether we should prepare for one and a half wars or two and a quarter wars. Such artificial assumptions neglect both the risks and opportunities that we might confront. We must be prepared to meet Soviet military power, however it might be used. We have to be stronger than we were before because the Soviets are stronger. Otherwise we will not be able to deter the conflict we all want to avoid. And if deterrence does fail, we must be able to win to survive.

In addition to the Soviet arms buildup of the last two decades, we confront a deteriorated geo-strategic situation. Areas of vital interest to the West, such as the Persian Gulf, and many of our needed strategic resources are now within easy reach of Soviet bases. Our own access to these areas has deteriorated.

What this means is that we and our allies may have to cope with bolder Soviet military initiatives, in many parts of the world, carried out either directly or through proxies. We have become an island nation. We face the possibility of conflicts in widely separated areas: Central Europe, the Persian Gulf, Africa, East Asia, or Central America. We may have to deal with more than one conflict at a time; and we must be able to contend with a conflict in one area without opening up critical vulnerabilities elsewhere.

Handling such contingencies simultaneously could stretch our military resources thin. But we will not restrict ourselves to meeting aggression on its own immediate front. If we are forced into war, we must be prepared to launch counter-offensives in other regions and try to exploit the aggressor's weaknesses wherever they exist. If aggression by superior forces cannot be reversed where it occurs, we should not be confined to that particular arena.

Our primary instrument to project our military power to distant, but vital, regions remains the Navy. Unfortunately, we have been cutting back the size of our fleet for the past 15 years. The
Soviets have been outbuilding us by a ratio of about 2 to 1 in surface ships, and 4 to 1 in submarines. As an island nation, we must have a margin of naval superiority.

To reverse the deterioration in the naval balance, we cannot sit by and await the design and the procurement of ideal ships. We must move swiftly now, and we are doing so. And of course, we must pay for the ships ordered and begun years ago.

Parts of our naval program—the aircraft carriers and battleships—have received much publicity. The reactivation and use of existing assets, such as the aircraft carrier Oriskany and the Iowa class battleships, will not only add substantial fire power to our arsenal much sooner, but will also save taxpayers a considerable sum over the cost of new ships. We can increase our nation's ability to act decisively at sea—and soon. The battleship, in fact, when equipped with modern missiles and electronics will provide levels of firepower and armored protection that would be prohibitively expensive to construct today. Battleships are the quickest and most cost-effective way to get more naval power to sea in the next few years.

So far, I have not dealt with nuclear forces. We cannot exorcise the dreadful danger of nuclear war by assuming that we have some tacit bargain with the Soviet Union, a contract to stabilize the nuclear confrontation in a way that would preclude the initiation of nuclear war. For over 15 years, we have been misled by the illusion that we merely had to codify in formal agreements some existing U.S.-Soviet understanding. For 15 years, we chose to overlook the evidence to the contrary: the thrust and purpose of the Soviet strategic buildup, and the stubborn Soviet resistance to our pleas in SALT that we jointly agree to slow the growth in strategic forces and move to substantial reductions. The chasm between our own expectations and reality became clear from the sheer magnitude of the Soviet strategic arms program and the imbalance that now exists in many areas. The Soviets spent roughly three times more than we did on strategic arms during the very time when we believed the "SALT process" was governing our strategic relationship.

Where does this leave us?

Both for a sound defense policy and for a sound arms control policy, we must be clear about the purpose of our nuclear forces. They have a fourfold mission: One, to deter nuclear attack on the United States and our allies. Two, to help deter a massive conventional attack. Three, to forestall nuclear blackmail in a major crisis. Four, should nuclear weapons ever be used against us, to limit destruction by preserving a capacity for further deterrence. This has of course been an objective of U.S. nuclear forces and of our strategy for nearly 30 years.
Today, our nuclear strategic forces require critical attention:

-- The survivability of our forces needs to be improved. This is a central problem in our ongoing study of the MX missile deployment.

-- Of particular importance is the requirement that a significant part of our strategic forces should be capable of enduring survival, even in the cataclysmic event of a protracted nuclear war. The inability of the would-be aggressor ever to put our nuclear forces totally out of action serves—in my thinking—as the most potent disincentive to the initiation of nuclear war.

-- A compelling need requiring urgent investment is the survivability of our communications systems. We must make sure that our forces will at all times serve national policy by remaining linked to our military communications network.

A reordering of priorities is always more meaningful—particularly in an era of budget stringency—if it is explicit about the things that are less important. To say that everything is "more important" is not saying very much. Here then is something for which we will no longer spend money:

Weapon systems will not be funded merely to make our forces mirror Soviet forces in terms of some superficial tally of missiles and bombers sitting on the ground in peacetime. Obtaining symmetry between U.S. and Soviet forces in terms of such superficial counts is not a requirement important enough to qualify for our scarce defense dollars.

Our vision, however, must reach beyond these immediate requirements. We know that the strategic nuclear arms we now select must help protect the peace beyond the turn of the century. We must therefore try to anticipate the requirements for stability and peace far into the future.

In some ways the task may become even more difficult. Despite our best efforts to halt the spread of nuclear weapons to other nations, we must be prepared for a world in which additional countries of varying degrees in responsibility may possess some nuclear capabilities.

Above all, we want to convince the Soviet leadership to join us in bringing nuclear armaments under genuine, meaningful controls. We want to be able to reduce nuclear armaments and indeed conventional armaments and work toward long-term stability for a world blessed by both peace and freedom. To do that, we must first make America strong again.

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