

Bush defense cuts increase war danger

by Kathleen Klenetsky

Less than two weeks prior to his floating summit with Mikhail Gorbachov, President George Bush has committed an incredible strategic blunder: His defense secretary, Richard Cheney, announced that the administration will seek huge cuts in U.S. defense spending. Cheney has ordered the armed services' chiefs to come up with proposals for slashing \$180 billion or more in spending over the next four years, despite the fact that the military budget has already declined by 15% after inflation since 1985.

The cuts will adversely affect nearly every aspect of the U.S. military, from the strategic missile modernization program, to the U.S. commitment to defend Western Europe against Soviet attack.

Although the administration has refused to be specific about what areas of the Pentagon budget the axe will strike most deeply, the only way such savings could be achieved would be through canceling major weapons programs, including the MX and Midgetman missiles, and through massive cutbacks in conventional forces, especially the American military presence in Europe and Asia.

First reported in the major American media on Nov. 18, and effectively confirmed by Cheney in subsequent newspaper and television interviews, the administration's decision will undoubtedly be seized upon by hardline military factions in Moscow as indisputable proof of profound U.S. moral, economic, and political weakness.

On the block

The kinds of cuts contemplated by the administration will gut the Armed Forces, and will render them incapable of any military action short of some ill-intentioned "special operations" actions in the Third World—for example, overthrowing leaders unpopular with the U.S. Establishment, such as Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega. This was the basic thrust

of the 1988 "Discriminate Deterrence" report, a major study on U.S. military strategy commissioned by the Reagan administration and overseen by a "former" follower of Leon Trotsky, Albert Wohlstetter.

The administration reportedly plans to seek between \$15 and \$20 billion in defense budget reductions for the 1990-91 fiscal year, with an additional \$180 billion or more to follow in the subsequent three years. The State Department says that President Bush will make a decision on precisely what cuts he will recommend for the FY1991 budget after his Dec. 2 summit meeting with Gorbachov off the coast of Malta. Bush "might well make his decision," especially on troop levels in Europe, "in light of what he learns and from what he discusses with Mr. Gorbachov in Malta," State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler disclosed Nov. 20.

The pretext which the administration is offering for its behavior, is, of all things, the increasing instability in the East bloc. Appearing on ABC television's "This Week With David Brinkley" Nov. 19, Secretary Cheney declared that the likelihood of conflict between the United States and U.S.S.R. is "at its lowest point since World War II." Cheney cited the recent events in Eastern Europe as evidence that reduced U.S. defense spending generally, and a smaller American military presence in Europe, is justified.

He further confirmed that the administration is contemplating withdrawing more troops from Europe than the 30,000 manpower decrease which the United States has put on the table at the Conventional Force talks (CFE) in Vienna.

"Given the changes that we see today in Eastern Europe," Cheney asserted, "I think it's possible to contemplate the possibility over the next few years that we may, indeed, be able to reduce the level of our deployments in Western Europe."

Such a withdrawal would, in fact, hand the Soviets one

of their chief strategic objectives, the elimination of the U.S. defense commitment to Western Europe.

In another interview, published in the Nov. 18 *Washington Post*, Cheney insisted that, "While you need to be concerned about possible reversal of trends in the Soviet Union," nevertheless "there's a real sense that you want to take advantage of these developments." In other words, turn a blind eye to reality, if it interferes with what you plan to do anyway.

Cheney told the *Post* that the cuts in the Pentagon budget would center on weapons systems such as the B-2 Stealth bomber, but would extend to other areas as well. "There is no way I'm going to do what I have to do without force structure reductions, weapons cancellations, contract terminations and base closings," he said.

In addition to slashing manpower and killing weapons programs, Cheney is expected to propose sharp reductions in military personnel.

While Cheney has been careful not to get too specific, other sources have been more candid about where the deepest cuts will come. Some military sources believe that as many as 300,000 full-time American troops, out of the current total of 2.1 million, could be decommissioned by 1995, with a large chunk of those coming out of current Western Europe deployments.

In response to Cheney's order to the services for blueprints for defense cuts, the Air Force has put forth a proposal for \$34 billion in reductions, predicated on base closings, a stretch-out in the purchase of the B-2 bomber, elimination of the F-15 fighter, and retiring some B-52s and the Minuteman II nuclear missile.

The Army has come up with a similar plan. According to a news leak, the Army has proposed eliminating as many as 200,000 civilian, reserve, and military employees, and abandoning its M1 tank modernization program. Under the plan, three entire Army divisions would be disbanded.

According to some reports, there are plans on administration drawing boards for cutting Navy strength by as many as 30 ships and perhaps one aircraft carrier.

The Strategic Defense Initiative is also expected to suffer lethal cuts. Despite some rhetorical flourishes about the importance of the program, the Bush administration has refused to fight for it. Indeed, President Bush just put his signature onto the 1990 Pentagon spending bill which, for the first time, reduces SDI spending from the previous year's level.

Pragmatism run wild

While some Bush league Washington pundits claim that Cheney's widely publicized pronouncements should not be taken at face value, and are actually a preemptive attempt to undercut a new, more savage, round of Democratic defense gouging, this kind of excuse-making just doesn't hold water.

Just compare former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's approach to the defense budget to Cheney's. Whereas Weinberger insisted on putting forth a defense bud-



Defense Secretary Richard Cheney: littleness in the face of historic challenge.

get that was based on the real world, no matter how unpopular it might be, Cheney's starting point is what he can get through Congress, no matter how idiotic it may be.

In any event, the tactic has already backfired. The administration's proposed defense gouging triggered a flurry of demands from the anti-defense establishment for even deeper reductions. Just a few days after Cheney's announcement, the *Washington Post* plastered a lengthy article on its front page reporting on a new study by MIT professor William Kaufmann, which claims that the U.S. defense budget could be halved over the next 10 years—without harming U.S. national security!

Former NATO commander Gen. (ret.) Andrew Goodpaster's recent Atlantic Council report, calling for sharp military budget reductions, and a 50% troop withdrawal from Western Europe, is also receiving major play. Rep. Les Aspin (D.-Wis.) commented that the defense budgets will now be "Gorbachov driven."

Aside from its strategic implications, the administration's projected Pentagon budget cuts will have a devastating effect on the domestic economy, which is already in such sorry shape that even the leading media cheerleaders of the great American recovery have been forced to admit that the country is in the grip of a deep recession. Defense stocks plummeted in the wake of Cheney's announcement; and as the cuts start taking effect, there will be a wave of massive layoffs, plant closings, and bankruptcies.

Slashing the defense budget is not the only present which Bush will bring with him to Malta. It appears quite likely that he will also have some economic concessions up his sleeve, including a commitment to give the Soviets Most Favored Nation status. A delegation of top Soviet trade officials was in the United States in mid-November for meetings with Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher and other officials, and it is quite likely that Washington will grant MFN status to Moscow within a few weeks to a month.