



AMERICA'S POST 9/11 MILITARY: Can Congress Reform Our Shrinking, Aging, Less Ready, More Expensive Forces?

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US defense spending will exceed \$570 billion in 2006, more than any year since 1946. This exceeds the rest of the world's military spending – combined. The largest adversary anyone can point to – China - spends a little more than a tenth of what we do, and North Korea and Iran each spend roughly one percent.ⁱ

Yet, US armed forces are smaller today than at anytime since 1945: in terms of Army divisions, naval combatants, and Air Force wings. This shrunken force is equipped with major hardware items that are, on average, aging, and we have been sending US forces into combat in Iraq and Afghanistan incompletely trained and equipped.ⁱⁱ

Technologists who heavily populate both the Pentagon and Washington DC's defense punditocracy profess that fewer US forces are actually a plus, because the newest equipment is so effective offering more capability. There is much analysis to back up this assertion, little of it based on objective, valid, and reliable data.

In sum, America's defense budget is out of all proportion to any conceivable threat, and yet America's forces are in real trouble.

How did it get this way?

The Pentagon's management is incompetent, and Congress, which is ultimately responsible, doesn't care.

Some examples illustrate.

IS SMALLER BETTER?

The Air Force's F-22 fighter provides a classic example of what has been happening to our armed forces. The program started in 1983; it quickly gained weight and cost, thus diminishing its performance as a fighter and the number we can afford. As the price grew from less than \$130 million per copy to more than \$360 million, the proposed inventory shrank from 750 to 181. A recent evaluation by one of the designers of the highly successful F-16 illustrates that the F-22's design ignores the realities of air combat and is an aerodynamic mediocrity, at best. Recent information from Air Force personnel indicates that, on average, an F-22 pilot gets 12 to 14 hours of training in the air per month, about half of what many experts believe would be adequate. Nonetheless, the "modernization" plan of adding F-22s as we retire F-15s proceeds with broad support. The F-15 inventory, initially more than 700 aircraft, is now aging faster than the F-22

will ever "replace" it. The program literally shrinks the fighter inventory; ages the force, and starves training. It does so at increasing cost.

Isolated example? Ask the Navy what has been happening to its overweight and over-cost DD/X destroyer. Ask the Army what is occurring with its galaxy of sensors and under-armored vehicles, dubbed optimistically the "Future Combat System."

The ultimate effect is on the battlefield, where some might think things have worked rather well. Unfortunately, the lopsided victories of US armed forces against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 were against an opponent that, with only minor exceptions, behaved in combat like a tethered goat led by a military jackass.ⁱⁱⁱ Researchers at the US Army's War College in Carlisle, PA came to the conclusion that the enemy's incompetence in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 was the critical element in the American victory that year.^{iv}

Subsequently, remnants of these same incompetent Iraqi forces, together with an almost incoherent combination of insurgents from disparate religious sects, lands, and motivations have all combined – with and against each other – to confront the United States armed forces with a situation that they have clearly failed to master.

And there you have it: a shrinking, aging, failing force at increased cost.

INCOMPETENT PENTAGON

The Pentagon may be the worst managed agency in the federal government.

Every three months, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) rates federal agencies on five measures of governance. The "Executive Branch Management Scorecard" for March 2006 ranks the Department of Defense (DOD) "unsatisfactory," the worst rating, in three of five categories; in the other two, the best DOD could do was "mixed results." Of the 25 agencies rated, only Veterans Affairs did worse. In a similar vein, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has identified more areas of managerial concern in the Pentagon than in any other cabinet-level department, including the VA, in its "High Risk" series of reports.

The temptation is to blame Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. While he will go down in history as a prime architect of the unfolding disaster in Iraq, he did not cause our high cost, shrinking military forces or the Pentagon's incompetent management. As decades of reports from GAO, CBO, and the DOD Inspector General make abundantly clear, he inherited the problems from his predecessors, several of them Democrats.

WHO OR WHAT IS TO BLAME?

The American Constitution is clear: The primary institution responsible for the nation's security is the Congress.

The Constitution charges Congress, not secretaries of defense or presidents, to "raise and support armies," "provide and maintain a navy," and "make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces." Congress' most powerful weapon to ensure effective armed forces is

the power to investigate, also known as “oversight.” Unfortunately, Congress has been sleeping deeply on the job.

One example, occurring in February 2003, illustrates the problem. At the time, it was obvious that America was about to go to war in Iraq; Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, were testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee. The first question the Chairman, John Warner, R. VA, asked of General Myers was whether US armed forces were ready to fight in Iraq. Myers responded, “Absolutely.”

This fifteen-second exchange was not the precursor to a lively dialogue. It was the totality of the hearing’s probe into the life and death question of military readiness during the pre-war build up. Had Senator Warner or the horde of committee staffers sitting behind him in the hearing room bothered to scratch the surface, they would have found real problems. Shortly after the hearing, Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki, sent a letter to Congress complaining that the US Army was anything but “absolutely” ready. The Army budget, he said, was already \$3.2 billion short for base operations, ammunition, and training. Since then, at soldiers’ expense we learned of other shortages: armored Humvees, body armor, shotguns, radios, desert boots, backpacks and “camelbacks,” sunglasses, machine gun repair parts, and lip balm are only a few of the necessary equipment the troops said they needed more of, or something better. They were all items a vigilant Armed Services Committee and its staff would have checked for.

Instead, several senators at the hearing (including Hillary Clinton, D. NY, Mark Pryor, D. AR, and Warner himself) directed their comments to home state pork. Subsequently, scores of American soldiers have, perhaps avoidably, died or been seriously wounded.

IS THERE A WAY OUT?

There are no magic solutions. Reforms, and reformers to advocate for them, regarding budget policy, financial management, weapons design, military personnel policy, and military doctrine – just for starters – are clearly needed. However, effective reforms will not emerge spontaneously from the swampy air of Washington DC. We should be asking, what will help create an atmosphere where reform, and reformers, might prosper?

It is a certainty that the quality of Congressional oversight must be improved. Were Congress to routinely obtain accurate information on defense programs and policies and an understanding of the implications, and if the Pentagon were to expect that Congress would regularly ferret out that information and analysis, behaviors in both institutions would likely change. But, getting – and acting on -- the information is key; as they say in Washington, “Information is power.”

Today, members of Congress do not know how to get information or even what it is. They subsist on biased, unreliable, and incomplete “factoids.” To members and their staff on Capitol Hill these days, the penultimate validation of defense data, of understanding a defense issue, is to find out what DOD says. Some who think they are getting the real skinny, ask military officers and DOD officials privately – some might even be critics of the official position.

Knowing the officially approved spin or the spin of the critics does provide data points on any given issue, but not a complete picture. Two opposing sides of biased information can just be two different flavors of baloney, not balance. Sorting out which side is right, if either, and getting to the bottom of the issues is a mystery to the modern Congress.

The first step to reform will require wholesale change in the primary mechanism members of Congress use to learn about defense issues: their staff. There is no such thing as a Republican F-16 or a Democratic aircraft carrier. Then, why do the Armed Services Committees and the Defense Appropriations Subcommittees hire separate Democratic and Republican staffs? The effect is to interject partisanship into national security issues, especially at the base information level.

The handiwork of this system is currently available in the form of committee reports on legislation. As analysis of the issues, these are pitiful documents. A truly professional staff would feel itself insulted by such a public work product.

A competent professional staff system for national security issues would have the following characteristics.

- The staffers would have demonstrated competence not just in the subject area assigned to them, but also formal training or experience in assessment techniques, such as auditing, program evaluation, or investigation. Today, members of Congress frequently hire ex-service pilots as aviation advisers. Such individuals may have the considerable brains and skill to fly modern aircraft, but they have no knowledge or experience in how to buy or evaluate them.^v
- The professional staff should work for members on both sides of the aisle. They should be hired and fired only by a joint decision of both the senior Democrat and Republican on a committee. They should also be afforded aggressive “whistleblower” protection (which they are now specifically denied.)
- The staff’s memoranda on all oversight issues should be public documents, when they are not by necessity classified. In all cases, their memoranda should be distributed to all members of Congress - not just those on the committee where they work. As a result, more members would be better informed. More importantly, the broader exposure and dissemination of information within the Congress and to the will likely make a committee staff member think longer, harder, and better before he or she communicates with a member of Congress.
- All national security staffers on Capitol Hill should be prohibited from accepting any job with any defense manufacturer and especially the Department of Defense for at least five years after they leave Capitol Hill. Period. No exceptions. Human nature is too frail to permit Boeing, Lockheed, or any defense manufacturer to dangle the prospect of future employment before, during, or after a staffer provides his or her analysis of proposed multibillion dollar defense contracts. The prospect of employment with DOD is just as problematic. Presidents and their Pentagons are every bit as anxious as the commercial manufacturers to influence data and advice in Congress.

The whole point is to put before members of Congress accurate, objective information whether they want it or not, and to do so publicly, or – in the case of classified analysis - with the concurrent knowledge of many others. Not only will the public and/or political opponents be looking over the shoulder of the substantive advisers to Congress on national security matters, both the advisers and the members will know that. After 31 years of working for various members on Capitol Hill and GAO, I know of no better way to “appeal to their patriotism.”

Problems will, of course, remain. One solution is to convince members to conduct inquiries that explore an issue rather than ones that lead to a pre-determined result. Another is to hold more than one hearing on major subjects, such as the single hearing the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee holds each year to “consider” the entire budget for the Navy and Marine Corps. Finally, something is needed to interest members in subjects other than pork for their states.

With professionally written staff memoranda distributed to all members and the press, committee chairmen would be under some pressure to probe the issues more thoroughly. More importantly, with a competent staff and public distribution of their memoranda, there will be less of a requirement to conduct oversight only via committee hearings. The memoranda will comprise a form of oversight in themselves.

CONCLUSION

From time to time, political perturbations force Congress to attempt self-reform. The result often comes in the form of newly proposed rules, or sometimes reorganizations. However, even if adopted by a majority, which is not an assured thing, these “reforms” usually have as much effect as changing the linen, or the room assignments, in a bordello.

Instead, ideas that revise how and what members think is needed. Different behavior will follow.

Better governance in Congress could also have a constructive impact on the decision making process in the Pentagon. When headstrong bureaucrats and politically appointed managers in the Pentagon know they are under adult supervision, we can have reason to think our constitutional system will work much better.

ENDNOTES

¹ Data for China, North Korea, and Iran is from the CIA's "World fact Book" at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.

¹ For example, see "House Memo: Army Unit Readiness for Iraq, Afghanistan Is Lagging," Inside the pentagon, July 6, 2006 at <http://defense.iwpnewsstand.com/insider.asp?issue=762006sp>

¹ The term "tethered goat" was coined by the commander of allied air forces in Operation Desert Storm. USAF General Charles Horner was referring to the ease with which the allied air component overcame Iraq's air defenses and was able to find targets on the billiard table like terrain of the theater. Long time military analyst of the middle east Anthony Cordesman at the Center for Strategic International Studies termed Saddam Hussein a "military jackass" for the quality of his control of Iraqi military operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

¹ "US Technology, Inept Enemy Led to Iraq Victory, Army Says," by Tom Bowman, Baltimore Sun, October 13, 2003.

¹ Many of them are also very biased in favor of the military services they stem from and find it difficult to believe their parent service could choose poorly. In this regard, it is notable that the most successful aircraft in the Air Force and Navy inventories today (the F-15, F-16, F18, and A-10) were initially selected over the strenuous opposition of those same services and many in the pilot communities among them.

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Winslow Wheeler worked on national security issues for 31 years for members of the U.S. Senate and for the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). In the Senate, Wheeler worked for Jacob K. Javits (R. NY), Nancy L. Kassebaum (R, KS), David Pryor (D, AR), and Pete V. Domenici (R, NM). In 2002, Wheeler authored an essay, under the pseudonym "Spartacus," about Congress' reaction to the September 11, 2001 terrorists attacks ("Mr. Smith Is Dead: No One Stands in the Way as Congress Lards Post-September 11 Defense Bills with Pork"). When Senators complained about Wheeler's criticisms, he was invited to resign from his position with the Republican staff of the Senate Budget Committee. Wheeler is the author of "[The Wastrels of Defense: How Congress Sabotages U.S. Security](#)" from the US Naval Institute Press. The book has been the subject of commentary and interviews on "60 Minutes," C-SPAN's "Book Notes," and various newspapers and radio stations.

ⁱ Data for China, North Korea, and Iran is from the CIA's "World fact Book" at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.

ⁱⁱ For example, see "House Memo: Army Unit Readiness for Iraq, Afghanistan Is Lagging," Inside the pentagon, July 6, 2006 at <http://defense.iwpnewsstand.com/insider.asp?issue=762006sp>

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^{iv} "US Technology, Inept Enemy Led to Iraq Victory, Army Says," by Tom Bowman, [Baltimore Sun](#), October 13, 2003.

^v Many of them are also very biased in favor of the military services they stem from and find it difficult to believe their parent service could choose poorly. In this regard, it is notable that the most successful aircraft in the Air Force and Navy inventories today (the F-15, F-16, F18, and A-10) were initially selected over the strenuous opposition of those same services and many in the pilot communities among them.