

Spend More on Defense—Now

For an immediate \$18 billion, Bush can show he's serious. **BY GARY SCHMITT AND TOM DONNELLY**

TO HIS CREDIT, George W. Bush made national defense an issue in his campaign. By raising the problem of military preparedness and, now, choosing a forceful defense secretary in Donald Rumsfeld, the incoming president has put himself in a strong position to follow through on an important policy priority and win a significant political victory.

To do so, Bush can take a page from The Gipper's playbook by moving quickly to request a healthy supplemental appropriation for defense. Ronald Reagan, just seven weeks after his inauguration in 1981, sent a revised defense budget request to Capitol Hill for \$12 billion—more than \$22 billion in today's dollars. By June 4, Congress had given him almost everything he'd asked for. Importantly, Reagan's early victory on defense relied heavily on support from conservative Democrats.

Bush could follow a similar path. There is growing recognition in Congress that the military's problems require immediate attention. Last week, a group of congressional defense leaders went to Austin to deliver just this message to Bush. The delegation included conservative, pro-defense Democrats like Rep. John Murtha of Pennsylvania—the sort of ally Bush will need in order to realize not only his defense plans but his larger agenda as well. Murtha said he was “impressed” by Bush and told him, “The people in this room are going to support you on national defense.” This is not empty bipartisanship: A significant defense supple-

mental appropriation—by, say, \$18 billion—would mark a basic reversal of Clinton administration policy.

And Bush could make a very strong case for it. The Pentagon's immediate problems are severe: degraded combat readiness; prematurely obsolescent equipment suffering the effects of increased use and lack of spare parts; personnel shortages, especially among highly trained specialists like pilots and front-line leaders; a declining quality of military life, especially for those serving overseas; and so on.

Congress is familiar with these complaints. For the last several years, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have provided Congress with lists of their “unfunded requirements.” Last year, they reported to Congress more than \$15 billion in unmet needs for 2001 and nearly \$18 billion for 2002; a new estimate totaling \$30 billion is said to be in the works.

There's not much to criticize on the chiefs' lists—mostly spare parts, improved combat training, and other very basic needs, as opposed to controversial, expensive new weapons. As Marine commandant Gen. James Jones stressed in his cover letter with last spring's list, “My most critical shortfalls . . . include recruiting and retention initiatives, family housing, barracks, . . . depot maintenance, corrosion control, and operating forces support. [M]odernization through updates of existing aviation and ground platforms continues to be stressed.”

An additional \$18 billion appropriation for defense could:

—make the pay and benefits improvements Bush advocated in the campaign retroactive to the 2001 fis-

cal year, for \$4.5 billion;

—fund 80 percent of the service chiefs' unmet readiness and short-term modernization requirements, at a cost of \$12 billion; and

—begin the development of a robust missile defense by adding \$500 million to the Space Based Infrared System, especially for the SBIRS-Low constellation of satellites, and \$500 million to accelerate the Navy Theater-Wide ballistic missile defense program.

During the campaign, Bush correctly talked about not merely rebuilding the military to make up for the problems of the Clinton years, but reforming the Defense Department as well. During the transition, the Bush camp has stressed reform—in Pentagon parlance, “transformation” through the “revolution in military affairs”—rather than mere rebuilding.

It's also clear that Bush selected Rumsfeld for this purpose. During the press conference announcing the nomination, Bush urged Rumsfeld “to challenge the status quo inside the Pentagon, to develop a strategy necessary to have a force equipped for warfare of the 21st century.” Rumsfeld got the message: “It is clearly not a time at the Pentagon for presiding or calibrating modestly,” he said in response. “We need to be arranged to deal with the new threats, not the old ones, with information warfare, missile defense, terrorism, defense of our space assets, and proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction throughout the world.”

Yet the transformation of the U.S. military that is required will take decades, as Bush acknowledged during the campaign. Before that work can begin, and to maintain American military preeminence through the long transition, the current force must be restored. The combination of steep cuts and increased operations not only has left the military gasping to meet existing commitments, but also makes our present armed forces a weak foundation upon which to build the force of the future. Like an injured or exhausted athlete, the military needs to regain its fitness be-

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fore training for the next Olympics.

Solving these pressing problems must be the first order of business if the U.S. armed forces are to reflect America's global leadership and continue the large number and variety of missions that have marked the post-Cold War era under both the Clinton and the previous Bush administrations. While it is important to build a different and dominant military force to meet the emerging threats, the United States cannot afford to take the 20-year "strategic pause" advocated by some transformation enthusiasts. In fact, to those working long hours to overcome a variety of shortages, the need for spare parts is more compelling than the need for transformation. And, indeed, Rumsfeld appears to understand this, suggesting at his confirmation hearing that an immediate infusion of money is needed.

The Bush team no doubt increasingly appreciates the fact that failure to address these immediate needs will hamper not only current military missions but also their own efforts at reform. This link between current problems and future solutions was captured in a recent memo from Gen. John Abrams, head of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command, which would direct transformation programs. Writing to Army chief of staff Gen. Eric Shinseki, a strong proponent of transformation, Abrams made it clear that "unless funding increases across the board, [the command] will fall further behind in these key development areas which underpin the future Army."

Promptly upon taking office, then, Bush should seize the opportunity to deliver on a significant campaign pledge. Beyond the material improvements that would result from an \$18 billion shot in the arm for defense, a quick supplemental appropriation or budget amendment would go a long way toward restoring the confidence of people in uniform. And it would be the basis for future transformation. A serious defense supplemental appropriation would combine good politics and good policy. ♦