

Silence of the Lambs

It is curious indeed when a president can review the state of our nation for nearly 90 minutes, propose dozens of new ways for the government to spend billions of dollars, yet fail to utter a single word about the need for an increase in defense spending.

Thursday night, the president again revealed himself the master of the minutiae of domestic policy, doling out small sums to develop the Delta in Mississippi and to discourage deadbeat dads in Minnesota. Americans in uniform—just another interest group in the White House's reckoning—got no more than a pat on the back for helping the administration conduct the air war over Kosovo.

Clinton's Capitol Hill audience doesn't have much room to complain. Through the Clinton years, congressional Republicans have been complicit in the neglect that is sapping American military strength to the point where a majority of the Joint Chiefs of Staff now admit their services are not up to the demands of the national military strategy.

The silence from the White House and the Capitol has been matched by the Republican presidential candidates. The men struggling to present themselves as the heirs to Ronald Reagan all say that reasserting American leadership and rebuilding U.S. armed forces are among their top priorities. But they seem to want to achieve the ends without devoting the means. George W. Bush wants to sustain an "era of American preeminence" and John McCain to extend the current "unipolar moment . . . for as long as we possibly can." But neither has made a case for the significant increase in defense spending that American primacy would require.

The silence of American political leaders on national defense is even more startling given the soaring federal budget surpluses. As we set new records for prosperity—as the president noted, next month will mark the longest period of economic growth in American history—defense spending's share of the economy has fallen to Depression-era levels. Indeed, a good portion of the credit for our economic well-being should go to the U.S. armed forces. Not only did they win the peace that made the prosperity of the 1990s possible, but this new economic era depends on worldwide security guarantees underwritten by American military power.

Domestically, the government's fiscal health is the result of increased tax revenues and a decade of restrained federal spending, the vast majority of which is due to cuts

in defense spending. Indeed, almost the entire reduction in the federal workforce touted by the president comes from cutting the armed services. "Reinventing government" is a euphemism for cutting the size of the armed forces.

Defense spending is now far below the requirements of American strategy and global leadership. When it first came to power, the Clinton administration sliced \$162 billion from the final five-year Bush defense plan. The Pentagon has never recovered. It is now billions short in needed modernization funds; its forces are increasingly ill-prepared for combat; and its troops and families are demoralized by a slipping quality of life and an increased pace of operations that a larger force would be needed to handle.

Not only have American armed forces suffered from more than a decade of neglect; projected defense budgets are too low to maintain today's military, let alone to make up for past cuts. The Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon has calculated that \$27 billion per year would be necessary simply to tread water. The Congressional Budget Office pegs the gap at \$37 billion or more, and is readying a comprehensive new study likely to increase that estimate. The most detailed analysis, completed recently by the Center for Strategic and International Studies—a think tank soon to be headed by John Hamre, now deputy secretary of defense—concluded that the Pentagon needs as much as \$100 billion more per year.

These funding problems have left the Joint Chiefs of Staff scrambling to perform their mission. Combat readiness rates continue to plummet: The two Army divisions now on duty in the Balkans recently were graded at the lowest state of readiness, and none of the Army's ten divisions is fully prepared for war. By contrast, all the units sent to the Gulf War achieved the highest readiness ratings. Meeting tomorrow's needs poses an even greater problem. The Pentagon has deferred almost \$1 trillion in weapons buys; on the current path this "procurement bow wave" will grow to exceed \$3 trillion by 2020. Problems of this magnitude will not be solved by marginal defense budget increases.

In this time of plenty, the long-term needs of national security deserve at least as much attention as the long-term needs of the Social Security and Medicare programs or the public's desire for lower taxes. Instead, from the White House, Capitol Hill, and the campaign trail, the silence is deafening.

—William Kristol