

March 14, 2008 - The Bills Come Due

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By Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., National Journal

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Since 1991, the United States has been the world's sole superpower. Now, 17 years later, the armed forces that underwrite that status have begun to fray. Nowhere are the limits of the U.S. military more evident than on the ground in Iraq, and so Congress and the media have focused their attention on the stretched ground forces of the Army and Marine Corps. U.S. control of the seas and skies is something that the public and policy makers tend to assume, as they have since the fall of the Soviet Union. But on the sea and in the air, America has coasted for two decades on investments made in the 1980s. Now, after a generation of heavy use around the globe, from Somalia and the Balkans in the 1990s to Afghanistan and Iraq today, hardware bought during the Reagan buildup is simply wearing out.

The chief of the Air Force has said publicly that he needs an extra \$20 billion -- per year -- beyond the administration's requested budget to restock his arsenal. Outside analysts suggest that the less-outspoken Navy needs about the same amount. But the services are laying that \$40 billion charge for future weapons on a country that is increasingly chafing under the costs of the current war.

"Domestic spending is going to come up and defense spending is going to come down, whoever's elected the next president," said Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., the House's top defense appropriator. "The money is going to dry up. We've got to do as much as we can this year with the supplemental budgets and with the base budget."

The irony of this cash crunch is that the Air Force and the Navy remain the strongest in the world, increasing their firepower since 1991 even as they have shrunk in size. For all of the media infatuation with smart bombs in the first Persian Gulf War, they amounted to less than 7 percent of the ordnance dropped on Iraq. Today almost all bombs carried by U.S. aircraft are precision-guided. For all of the impressive footage of Tomahawk cruise missiles hitting Iraqi buildings in 1991, the Navy had only 35 ships with 2,806 launchers capable of firing them. Today it has 74 ships with 7,508 launchers.

In 1991, Air Force and Navy data networks were so crude, and so incompatible, that couriers had to hand-carry strike plans from the headquarters on land to the aircraft carriers at sea. Today, fighter planes are equipped with high-speed data links. The same explosion in computing power that took the Internet from academic obscurity to economic ubiquity in less than a generation sparked a revolution in military targeting as well. The problem, however, is that all of these brave new electronics still need some kind of ship or plane -- a platform, in Pentagon speak -- to carry them into battle, and those platforms are running up against some basic physical limits.

With the end of the Cold War, defense spending dropped by \$42 billion between 1990 and 1994. Some \$39 billion of that came out of the research, development, and procurement budget. So, while the military's expenditures for operations, maintenance, and personnel stayed about level, even as the size of the armed forces shrank, the Pentagon had only about half as much to spend on new equipment.

The services weathered this "procurement holiday" in different ways. The Air Force all but stopped buying combat aircraft while it invested in research and development of a supersonic stealth fighter, the F-22 Raptor, which finally entered full production in 2005. In the meantime, the average age of the Air Force's fighter fleet doubled, from less than 10 years old in 1991 to more than 20 today. (The Navy's aircraft fleet has also aged, though not as dramatically as the Air Force's.) Some major aerospace contractors went under, and some scraped by doing other work for the space, civilian, and foreign-military sectors.

Because the Navy is the sole customer for the "Big Six" shipyards that make all U.S. warships, both politics and preservation of the industrial base called for continuing ship construction, albeit at a markedly lower rate. The Navy made ends meet by retiring older, expensive-to-maintain vessels ahead of schedule, keeping the fleet relatively young at the price of halving its size.

The bottom line for both services, however, was the same: Major new purchases were delayed, stretched out, or cut. This was a stopgap, not a solution. Throughout the 1990s, a growing chorus of defense analysts warned of a coming train wreck, when all of the deferred modernization bills would arrive at once. What they did not expect was that those bills would come due during America's biggest and most expensive war since Vietnam.

It is hard for Defense officials to make a case for supersonic stealth fighters and warships bristling with missiles when policy makers are grilling them about body armor and mine-resistant trucks for troops in battle every day. Defense Secretary Robert Gates flatly told Congress: "The reality is, we are fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the F-22 has not performed a single mission in either theater." In response, Air Force generals have been so vociferous in campaigning for the fighter program that they have verged on "open warfare" with the administration's budget planners, one veteran congressional staffer said. "In all my years on Capitol Hill," he said, "I have never seen the services as outspoken about their needs."

The air and sea services certainly make the case for their own relevance. Besides an increasing number of air strikes since the beginning of the 2007 "surge" of troops into Iraq, "what you see is Air Force airplanes providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in direct support of ground forces," said Maj. Gen. Paul Selva, the service's director of strategic planning. With land vehicles vulnerable to roadside bombs, Selva added, Air Force transports shuttle an average of 2,000 troops a day around Iraq and Afghanistan. But even Selva puts the case for high-tech, high-cost systems in terms of future conflicts, not the current low-tech war.

"The question with the F-22 is the long-term strategic horizon," Selva said, "because whatever number we end up [buying] with the F-22, that's the number we're going to have for the next 20 years." The Navy, likewise, emphasizes that the ships it builds today must last for decades in a world where lethal technologies are proliferating rapidly. Whether these long-term arguments will shake an extra \$40 billion out of Congress is an open question. And whether the services' planned purchases are the right investments for the future is another question altogether.

"My main concern is readiness for the unexpected, for what's around the corner," said Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. "You do your best to have high-technology systems to deter and prevail in the unexpected [future] -- but the need to bolster the ground forces is highly important today. We have to do our very best to balance them out."