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The dilemma that Robert Gates faces at the Pentagon is whether to spend on hardware or on humans.

By Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.

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Keeping Robert Gates on as secretary of Defense was more than a political gesture by a Democratic president-elect intent on having a Republican in his Cabinet. By choosing this particular Republican for this particular position, Barack Obama made a policy choice to affirm a growing bipartisan consensus on what the Pentagon needs to do. The essentials: draw down cautiously in Iraq; ramp-up judiciously in Afghanistan; replace Reagan-era equipment worn out by the two wars; and relieve the stress on over-deployed troops by improving benefits and adding 92,000 soldiers and marines.

The only problem with this widely supported wish list is an equally broad consensus that the Pentagon cannot afford to do it all. "We cannot sustain the amount of money we're spending on the military," said Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., who chairs the Defense panel of the House Appropriations Committee. "We've had the supplemental [budgets], but that's going to dry up, and then we're going to have a real problem. Personnel is going to be competing directly with procurement."

Two expensive commitments, both enshrined in the Pentagon's plans and blessed by Congress, are on a fiscal collision course. The first is the addition of almost 100,000 troops, at an estimated annual cost of \$14 billion, to the military's pay and benefits burden, which at approximately \$160 billion a year and rising is already more than a quarter of the Defense budget. The second is the long-deferred replacement of aging weapons systems, most bought during the Reagan buildup of the 1980s, with high-tech hardware such as the multiservice F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, a \$240 billion program scheduled to move from its already-expensive development phase to large-scale production over the next four years.

This dilemma pits defense and aerospace contractors against advocates for military personnel and veterans, with both lobbies readying for battle in 2009. Within the Pentagon, the budget squeeze sets the

personnel-heavy Army and Marines, which have borne the brunt of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, against the hardware-heavy Air Force and Navy, which have played supporting roles in the wars. Within the Army itself, acolytes of the Gen. David Petraeus school of counterinsurgency, which used the 2007 troop "surge" in Iraq to boost security in villages and neighborhoods, are aligned against officers who see dangerous atrophy in the skills and equipment needed for high-speed, large-scale maneuvers such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein. In essence, the debate boils down to manpower versus firepower.

Since the Vietnam War and the military draft ended in 1973, Pentagon planners have repeatedly reduced the size of the force -- from 2.25 million troops in 1973 to just 1.4 million today -- to pay for new equipment. That thinking reached its height, or perhaps its nadir, under former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. He came into office contemplating a 20 percent cut in Army combat forces (two of 10 divisions) to pay for high-tech weaponry. After 9/11, he resisted calls to enlarge the force or even to deploy more troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. The bipartisan backlash led to Gates's congressionally approved plan to add 92,000 troops.

"The Republican policy [under Rumsfeld] has been to skimp on the manpower side and to say, well, technology will provide the answers," said Richard Danzig, one of the senior Clinton-era Defense officials advising Obama, in a pre-election interview with National Journal. "That proposition turns out not to be right." Even peacetime commitments require large U.S. deployments around the world, he argued, "and then when you add a conflict like Afghanistan, where Senator Obama has been clear he would add to the number of combat brigades, you can see the potential demand."

But other top Democrats fear that the military will shortchange modernization to pay for more troops that it will soon no longer need. "We're going to get the heck out of Afghanistan," Murtha said. "We have to resist putting a lot of troops in, thinking that's going to solve it. That's what they said in Vietnam," where Murtha fought as a Marine officer. "When I was there, we had a couple hundred thousand [troops in the country]. They went up to 500,000. It didn't do it."

From this perspective, the lesson of Vietnam and Iraq is not that counterinsurgency campaigns require a bigger military to prevail, but rather that such wars are bottomless pits to be avoided in the first place. Even with a draft, the nation could not muster a large enough force to prevail, in Murtha's view. And without a draft to compel young Americans to serve with minimal compensation, the cost of keeping the military at the cost of keeping the military at current levels is on the rise. "We're spending \$2.1 billion [in bonuses] for folks to re-enlist," Murtha said, "and in the meantime the procurement budget is not near what it should be."

Unlike procurement or research and development, which have readily identifiable line items in the Defense budget, the true costs of military personnel are scattered across accounts. A comprehensive analysis of fiscal 2007 data prepared by Pentagon staffer Jeffrey Eanes for Defense Undersecretary for Personnel and Readiness David S.C. Chu -- a cost-cutter

outright hated by many military personnel advocates -- shows some dramatic figures.

In 2007, military salaries, or "basic pay," amounted to more than \$48 billion -- but that was less than half of total spending on personnel. Enlistment and re-enlistment bonuses, increased sharply to encourage recruits to join and current troops to stay despite repeated deployments to war zones, totaled \$1.9 billion. Accrual payments set aside to cover future retirement benefits, which Congress boosted significantly in 2000, reached \$12.9 billion. Housing allowances, also up sharply since the 1990s, exceeded \$15.5 billion. Health benefits doubled from 2000, totaling \$24 billion in 2007.

All told, Chu's office calculated, the total cost of pay and benefits for a single person in uniform has risen 114 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars since the draft ended in 1973, and 47 percent just since 2000, to a 2007 average of more than \$100,000 per capita. (See chart.) And that figure does not include the additional 92,000 troops, which will add about \$14 billion more a year -- after the department pays out an estimated \$108 billion in start-up costs over 2007-13 to recruit, hire, and equip the new troops. For comparison, the Air Force's F-22 stealth fighter program, a favorite poster child for critics of cost overruns, costs a "mere" \$62 billion over its lifespan, and the Air Force requested just \$4 billion for 20 of the aircraft for 2009, a third of the yearly cost for the troop increase.

So, as Gates, Obama, and Congress adjust the Defense budget, what is the best value per dollar added -- or the least damage per dollar subtracted -- on the margin: humans or hardware? The answer depends on the mission. With RussiaChina increasingly wealthy and assertive, "long term, you've got to worry about preventing a conventional war," Murtha contended. "You've got to have the edge technologically." Conversely, those who see insurgencies such as Iraq and Afghanistan as the main near-term threat argue for more personnel.

But one of the few thinkers to approach the question mathematically, Stephen Biddle, whose 2004 book *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, analyzes data from more than 382 battles, argues that the dichotomy is overdrawn -- and that, "as a general rule," manpower is a better investment than firepower for most types of conflict.

In the face of overwhelming U.S. firepower, regular troops can switch to hit, run, and hide guerrilla tactics, just as the North Vietnamese army did in the 1960s. But guerrillas can also stand and fight such firepower with remarkable tenacity, as Hezbollah soldiers did against Israel in Lebanon in 2006, by using sound tactics: concealing themselves against high-tech sensors, digging in against the precision weapons that did find them, and using a few sophisticated missiles bought on the black market. Biddle is not alone in predicting that Hezbollah-style "hybrid" threats -- neither classically conventional nor purely insurgent -- will become more common. To defeat such well-hidden and well-armed foes, he argues, the best investment is not high-tech, long-range weapons but a large well-trained infantry to pry them out of their holes.

For Biddle, however, the real issue in adding 92,000 troops is not the next war but the current one. "Whether it's a good idea or a bad idea depends on the specific scenario you're facing, and we're in a real, live war where the priorities are fairly clear: to avoid defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq," he said. In contrast to Murtha's fear that counterinsurgency is a bottomless pit, Biddle said, "My own sense is that success doesn't require an additional half-million troops." The planned increase of 92,000 may well be enough to make a difference, he said, and "then it's absolutely worth that \$14 billion a year."

When -- and if -- Iraq and Afghanistan are more stable, the United States can reconsider whether it needs so many ground troops. But the world is unstable enough that in the foreseeable future the U.S. will probably find all too many places to send them.