
Defense Challenges

By

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[The following is a reprint of remarks made by Secretary Aspin, following the administration of his Oath of Office as Secretary of Defense at the Armed Forces Welcoming Ceremony, Fort Myer, Virginia, on February 1, 1993.]

General Powell, thank you very much for those kind remarks, and thank you for being my host on behalf of our servicemen and women. I want to say a couple of things here today to my old friends, my family, and supporters who have been with me for the last 20 years representing the 1st District of Wisconsin. The first thing is thank you very, very much. Your support, your help, your friendship, they have been invaluable. The second thing is don't think your job is over. I am going to need your help, your support, and your friendship even more now. We are still in this together, and the task we face is a tough one. This new world order is long on the "new world" and a little short on the "order."

And I want to acknowledge my new friends and associates, the civilians and service members who work in the Pentagon. At the heart of my plan is the notion that we must all work together as a fully integrated and cooperative team to get the results that we need to deal with this new world.

I think the challenges we will face together fall basically into two categories. One category concerns the top priority things the Defense Department has to do at home. Essentially, that means maintaining the superb quality of our forces and the high technology advantage we have in our systems as we face the inevitable drawdown of these forces.

The second category of challenges concerns dealing with the dangers we face in this fast changing, post-cold war, post-Soviet world. I talk about these as I look behind me and see my colleagues and friends from the House of Representatives, and the times that we have worked together and the way we have come together, grappling basically with these issues.

First, at home. The men and women in today's armed services are the finest that have ever served in this country. The President has made clear, time and again, that we must maintain this quality as we go about this inevitable reduction in the forces. The members of our armed forces represent a national resource that must be maintained.

On high-technology. During the cold war, we faced an opponent who relentlessly fielded new systems in larger and larger numbers. We responded by producing our own new generations of systems with emphasis on technological superiority. We reasoned that if we could not out-build them, we could compensate, perhaps more than compensate, by maintaining a technological advantage.

With the end of the cold war, the need to continuously field new generations of systems is now out of the question, but high technology has only proved to be more valuable, as we saw in the war with Iraq. High technology, precision weapons, and other systems reduced U.S. casualties, brought a more rapid end to the war, and reduced civilian casualties through such

developments as reduced collateral damage, and that is what put it all together for us. The high technology systems were at the heart of that successful enterprise.

The difficulty that looms before us today is how to maintain this technological edge into the future decades, when we have to have this technological edge, and how do we maintain the industrial base to produce these systems without the high production levels of the old cold war budgets? Together, we need to answer that question.

The second whole category of challenges is just as formidable as this first. It concerns how do we respond to the outside world? With our cold war adversary gone, what kind of a defense do we now need? We know for certain that the end of the cold war does not mean the end of defense. The war with Iraq made that only too clear. But the end of the cold war does mean the end of our old way of looking at defense needs.

Four dangers have emerged that concern us today. The first is the new nuclear danger. Instead of thousands of nuclear warheads from the Soviet Union, the new nuclear danger stems from a handful of warheads in the hands of terrorists or terrorist states. The leaders of the old Soviet Union were thugs who did preside over an evil empire, but at least they were not crazy. If nuclear weapons continue to spread, we will not always be so sure about the owners of nuclear weapons in the future.

After nuclear danger, the second danger we face is from regional conflicts. These danger do not put the existence of the United States at risk. Only a power like the former Soviet Union could pose such a risk. But rather, the threats posed here are potentially threats to the United States vital interests. Saddam Hussein threatened vital interests when he appeared to be headed for control of much of the world's oil through the tactic of brutal invasion.

The third danger out of the four, arises from the possibility of a failure of reform, particularly in the former Soviet Union. Democracies tend to make war less, support terrorism less, and keep better treaties. The rise of any dictatorship in the former Soviet Republics would mean a less peaceful world, and certainly a more difficult world for the United States.

President Clinton has been eloquent on the fourth danger. And in fact, he would put it first not fourth. That danger is the failure to see our national security interests in a way that includes the economy. Economic well-being is vital to our security. The Defense Department has a specific role to play in conversion and reinvestment.

So there it is. Four brand new challenges that we need to undertake with a shrinking defense budget—an enormous challenge. It all adds up to a formidable job, but we have the ability to deal with it. We have the finest military forces in the world. We have a talented and dedicated civilian work force. The Pentagon probably has more talent per square foot than any building in Washington.

These problems cannot be solved from the top down. They are going to require all our talents and our efforts.