In the summer and fall of 2000 a political consensus emerged in Washington that supported real military spending increases anywhere from 10 to 20 per cent over the next five years. If “Holding the Line” had been published at that time it might well have been seen as irrelevant by policy-makers swept up in enthralment of budget surpluses. Fortunately for our security policy, this insightful book appeared during the long winter of 2001 when the prospects don’t seem quite so flush for the Pentagon. A slowing economy and the congressional enthusiasm for large tax cuts are threatening to absorb or erase much of the projected Federal surplus, which the armed services had hoped to consume in the years ahead.

Thanks to a parting 5 percent increase in the Fiscal Year 2002 defense budget by Bill Clinton, George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld have felt comfortable in putting a “hold” on budget increases until the new Administration completes a series of top-down reviews. In doing so the Secretary of Defense has signaled that civilians will be taking the policy initiative back from the service chiefs where it has resided during most of the Clinton years. This has had the effect of giving proposals for strategy and force posture changes by independent civilian analysts more than usual play in this year’s reviews, debates, and political/bureaucratic contention.

Lost Opportunity for Military to Reshape Itself Marks Last Decade

“Holding the Line, U.S. Defense Alternatives for the Early 21st Century” is an edited collection of forward-looking articles examining the potential for military policy reform. Editor Cindy Williams and contributor Lawrence Korb set the context by reviewing the changes of the first decade after the Cold War. Williams concludes, “Stuck in the Cold War pattern of force structure, organization, equipment, and infrastructure, the U.S. military has frittered away a decade of opportunity to reshape itself for the future.” Combine this with the steady and seemingly unstoppable rise in real costs for military weapons, salaries, operations, and maintenance and we have an explanation for the current pressure to increase military spending despite the fact that it is already at more than 90% of average Cold War levels.

The early chapters of the book examine the potential savings from three sources: infrastructure downsizing and out-sourcing of Pentagon functions; burden-sharing with European and South Korean allies; and further reductions in nuclear weaponry and programs. In each case the authors conclude that savings are possible and desirable, but when Williams adds up the total realizable annual savings from these sources it remains substantially less than her target of $35 billion.

Future Requirements: Revise Strategy; Rethink Force Structure

Williams then proposes looking for additional savings in the conventional forces. This requires two things in her view: a revision of strategy and an end to the political condominium in which the Army, Air Force, and the Navy get substantially equal shares of the budget pie. She writes, “It stands to reason that the end of the Cold War and a world of new technology might have sparked a change in the relative utility of or preferences for airplanes, tanks, rockets, ships, or helicopters. Yet the past decade has seen no real change in the budget share each service holds onto each year.”

In pursuit of savings in the conventional forces, Williams asks three military policy analysts, Owen Cote, James Quinlivan, and Karl Mueller, to write chapters proposing strategies and force structures oriented, respectively, to maritime, ground, and air power. In each case the authors succeed in presenting modest changes in national strategy, service roles, and service assets, and identifying substantial savings in defense dollars. The resulting
programs are decidedly moderate, yet the challenge to the Joint Chiefs is radical. From the services’ perspective this way of thinking about strategy and budgets opens the way to “departmental fratricide.”

Williams concludes that, “It is time for the nation to set military priorities, cut forces that are no longer relevant, eliminate programs that no longer make sense, and reward innovation, without regard to the budget shares that the services held during the Cold War.” Given that the Clinton administration could not muster sufficient political support for cutting the excess infrastructure the services were begging to dispense with, why should we hold out any hope for breaking the lock on service shares of the budget?

The answer lies in the particular budget crunch George W. Bush is busy building. After spending away in tax cuts the budget surplus legacy of the Clinton years, radical military reform may become a necessary invention. And the Cheney-Rumsfeld-Powell team may just have the weight required to take on the Chiefs and win.

Congressional leaders of both parties would be well advised to stop complaining about Bush’s decision to temporarily “hold the line” in defense spending and instead pick up this book, which provides several reasonable paths to a less costly and more appropriate military. If Democrats, in particular, continue to support broad military budget increases they risk walking unprepared into a Bush budget squeeze. When the Federal surplus starts to melt away, Bush can be expected to push for cuts in domestic programs and in entitlement benefits. Meanwhile if Democrats have failed to develop and promote serious costcutting military policy reforms they will have few good options. The Democrats need the sort of defense policy alternatives found in “Holding the Line” so they can effectively move to protect Social Security, Medicare, and other domestic programs when the going gets tough a year from now.


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