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## Clinton's Strong Defense Legacy

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# Clinton's Strong Defense Legacy

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## MAJOR MISUNDERSTANDING

THE NOTION that President Bill Clinton was a poor steward of the armed forces has become so commonly accepted that it is now often taken for granted—among moderates and independents as well as Republicans such as George W. Bush, who made the charge in the first place. The Clinton administration, so the thinking goes, presided over an excessive downsizing of the U.S. military, seriously weakening the magnificent fighting machine built by Ronald Reagan and honed by George H.W. Bush. It frittered away American power and left the country an object of derision to its enemies, tempting them to misbehave.

This assessment, however, is wrong. The Clinton administration's use of force (or lack thereof) may be controversial, but the Clinton Pentagon oversaw the most successful defense drawdown in U.S. history—cutting military personnel by 15 percent more than the previous administration had planned while retaining a high state of readiness and a strong global deterrence posture. It enacted a prescient modernization program. And the military it helped produce achieved impressive successes in Bosnia and Kosovo and, more significant, in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although these victories were primarily due to the remarkable dedication and skill of U.S. troops, credit is also owed to Clinton's defense policy.

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## *Clinton's Strong Defense Legacy*

The Clinton defense team did not, however, do a good job of managing military morale, taking too long to figure out how to distribute a demanding workload fairly and sustainably across a smaller force. As a consequence, U.S. troops became overworked and demoralized, and many left the military or considered doing so. Although many of these problems were largely repaired by the end of the decade, they undoubtedly detract from Clinton's military achievements. But they do not justify the overwhelmingly negative assessment of his defense record.

### EQUIPPED FOR A NEW ENEMY

ADVOCATES of military transformation, the current rage in defense policy circles, do not think that the Clinton administration went far enough in modernizing and reshaping the military. But this assessment is unfair. Although Clinton spent only half of what Reagan did on procurement, this was partly because much of the military's antiquated weaponry had already been replaced during the Reagan buildup. Moreover, the Clinton Pentagon made good use of the scarce funds it had, purchasing key battlefield technologies and improving behind-the-scenes preparedness.

The technological superstars of the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns included not only F-16 fighter jets, Abrams tanks, and Bradley fighting vehicles—built largely under Reagan—but unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), missile defense systems, satellite-guided weapons, and improved rapid-targeting and radar technology, developed chiefly during the Clinton years. The Predator UAV, for example, which was used to monitor key targets in Afghanistan and to attack fleeing terrorists, began as an experimental program in 1994. Global Hawk, a larger and higher-altitude UAV, was developed around the same time.

The Clinton years also saw the development of the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missile defense system, a huge improvement over the primitive Patriot system that performed so poorly in Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Initial variants of PAC-3 successfully intercepted at least 50 percent of ballistic missiles during the recent Iraq war. The Javelin antitank missile and the JSTARS radar-imaging aircraft, other recent success stories, were also developed in the mid-1990s.

One of the Clinton administration's most important legacies was to extend the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology. A large share of Tomahawk cruise missiles, which had originally depended on a complex terrain-matching navigation system, were guided by GPS by the end of the 1990s. Meanwhile, the GPS-guided Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM)—showcased during Operation

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The Clinton Pentagon enacted a bold and prescient program of modernization.

Enduring Freedom in 2001—was in advanced engineering in 1995 and in low-rate production by 1997. In addition, by 2003, 90 percent of the U.S. military's tactical aircraft were capable of precision strikes, compared with just 10 percent during Operation Desert Storm, and 75 percent of all ordnance dropped in Operation Iraqi Freedom last spring was

precision guided. As a result, the United States and the United Kingdom probably achieved more in the 40,000 sorties of Operation Iraqi Freedom than was achieved in the 125,000 sorties conducted during Operation Desert Storm.

Advances in rapid targeting were also impressive. In the first Gulf War, targets were usually selected a couple of days in advance. By the time of the Kosovo campaign, that time period was down to hours. In the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, targets could be attacked within 15 to 20 minutes of being identified, primarily because of Clinton-era initiatives. The information needed for this rapid decision-making was carried on a global satellite network using both civilian and military assets, with its data transfer rate expanded from 200 million bits per second during Operation Desert Storm to over a billion bits per second in Afghanistan.

There were less glamorous but equally crucial improvements in military transport and logistics too. The Clinton defense team added at least 50 percent more stocks of prepositioned military equipment to the Persian Gulf and the Korean Peninsula. It bought dozens of C-17 transport aircraft, maintaining the military's overall capacity for strategic airlift, even as older planes were retired. It bought more than a dozen large medium-speed roll-on/roll-off (LMSR) ships, more than doubling the nation's fast sealift capacity. And it adopted streamlining practices used by FedEx and Home Depot, such as bar-coding

supplies for easy tracking. These capabilities came into their own during the rapid buildup of American combat forces in the Persian Gulf before Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Finally, for those who insist on bigger, more set-piece reforms, it was the Clinton administration that helped the army embark on a path to being lighter and more deployable. Under the able direction of U.S. Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki, the army started two major efforts: development of the so-called Stryker brigades and the creation of a future "objective force," targeted for initial deployment by 2010. These concepts allow smaller units to provide combined-arms capabilities in combat, use lighter vehicles with standardized chassis, and rely on information and mobility rather than heavy armor as their primary means of protection on the battlefield. If anything, the danger now is that these ideas will be pushed too fast, before the technology can deliver what is promised. But this does not detract from the Clinton administration's laudable efforts in bringing these creative—and farsighted—programs into being.

#### BAGHDAD VIA BELGRADE

THE CLINTON administration's record on the actual use of force must be kept separate from its accomplishments in military modernization and maintaining readiness. The latter is the focus here. That said, the best way to measure the health of a military force is to examine its performance in the conflicts it wages. And, taking this approach, the conventional wisdom that the Clinton administration was a poor military manager looks even flimsier. A neglected military would simply not have had the stellar war-fighting record of the U.S. armed forces over the past decade. And although the Clinton defense team got off to a poor start in Somalia, several successful operations in the mid- and late 1990s revealed that the military Clinton inherited from Reagan and Bush was still in very good shape.

The bombing of Bosnian Serb positions in 1995 helped produce the Dayton peace accord, which ended the bloody civil war that had ravaged the former Yugoslavia for half a decade. Four years later, vigorous and sustained bombing of Serbia helped win the Kosovo war, after which U.S. troops performed admirably in Balkans stabilization

efforts. Even those who question whether these missions were desirable must concede the proficiency with which they were carried out: accidents were few, casualties were extremely low, and combat readiness was restored quickly to units rotating through the region once they returned to their permanent bases.

The U.S. military also performed well in and around Iraq. The Operation Desert Fox air attacks of late 1998, conducted by U.S. and U.K. forces in response to Saddam Hussein's obstruction of UN inspections, had few problems striking their targets and led to no allied aircraft losses. Similarly, the tens of thousands of sorties conducted to maintain the Iraqi no-fly zone during the 1990s led to no pilot losses or captures. Could a hollowed-out military really compile such an impressive track record?

But by far the best demonstrations of the Clinton armed forces' capabilities have occurred under George W. Bush. Both the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts led to impressive U.S. victories, which

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The Clinton military's capabilities have been showcased under George W. Bush.

owed at least as much to the quality of the military personnel and equipment in the operations as to the effectiveness of the battle plans. Operation Enduring Freedom, which toppled the Taliban in just 11 weeks, came less than nine months into the Bush presidency and only one week into the administration's first fiscal year. This campaign was clearly fought with a military maintained, trained, and equipped under Clinton and his predecessors and the Congresses that worked with them. True, the Bush administration had convinced Congress to pass a \$6 billion supplemental to the 2001 defense budget early the previous summer. But even in the unlikely event that half of this sum had been spent by the time of the Afghan war, this would have amounted to less than a one percent increase in military resources for the fiscal year.

Assigning credit for the recent toppling of Saddam is more complicated, as Operation Iraqi Freedom was fought using a military that the current administration had time to influence. Yet, although the Pentagon under Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had boosted the defense budget substantially after September 11, 2001, it had not changed the basic standards of military recruitment, retention,

training, or equipment maintenance applied by the Clinton Pentagon. The spending increases have allowed a greater fraction of the force to meet those standards, but they have not broken any new ground in policy or in best practices.

In any case, two years is a short time in defense policymaking. The post-Vietnam military recovery is widely considered to have taken the better part of a decade to accomplish. It was not until the second term of the Reagan presidency that enough parts and equipment had been purchased, enough people had been recruited, and enough training had been conducted to create the kind of standards seen since then. Likewise, if the military had been in poor shape in early 2001, it would not have been able to turn itself around in time to accomplish the remarkable victory in Iraq last spring.

#### FIVE STEPS FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

A FINAL REPUDIATION of the claim that Clinton was a poor steward of the armed forces comes from quantitative measures of military readiness. There are two risks in relying on metrics. The first is that only certain kinds of data can be cited, so that problems such as low morale, which do not appear in statistics about training or aircraft availability, can be overlooked. The second is that numbers can be easily spun. Both these risks, however, can be minimized: by relying on a wide body of data (such as that assembled by Brian Finlay and Jason Forrester of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation) that probes beyond the obvious questions and paints a more complete picture and by using simple indicators rather than elaborate or subjective ones.

Under this dual approach, the Clinton military fares well, although admittedly not extremely well. If the Vietnam-era military scores a C, and the Operation Desert Storm force an A, Clinton's military would probably receive an A- or B+. On the plus side, operations and maintenance were strong, military compensation was adequate, training and personnel standards remained high, and, largely as a result of the above factors, military safety records improved. On the negative side, certain types of equipment became less dependable, and morale worsened considerably.

In terms of overall resources, operation and maintenance spending went up substantially in the 1990s. The United States spent about \$57,000 per soldier in 1990. By 2000, the figure was \$80,000. Even factoring out increases in costs largely unrelated to readiness—such as environmental cleanup, maintenance of unnecessary base infrastructure, and health care—real resources increased by more than \$10,000 per uniformed member of the armed forces during the Clinton presidency. Meanwhile, although real-dollar compensation rates declined slightly during Clinton's first few years in office, they rose steadily during the rest of his presidency. And for all the talk of military personnel on food stamps, only one-fourth as many troops received such benefits at the end of the Clinton term as did during the George H.W. Bush presidency. Other compensation actually increased with the restoration of more generous retirement benefits that had been reduced during the Reagan years.

The story with training is also good, although not uniformly so. Using the main Pentagon indicators for major combat forces—miles driven per tank crew per year, hours flown per pilot per month—the rigor of training slipped slightly in the 1990s relative to the 1980s, with average reductions typically ranging from 10 to 15 percent. Yet falling standards affected mostly those units not expected to deploy quickly, and although this called into at least some question the United States' ability to handle two simultaneous major wars, it did not translate into shoddiness or hollowness. Overall, troops remained sufficiently well trained that their safety records improved over the period, so that annual peacetime death rates per 100,000 troops declined from 80 in 1990 to fewer than 60 by the decade's end.

By any available metrics, the quality of military personnel remained excellent under Clinton. Average military experience increased from 6.5 years in 1990 to 7.5 years by 2000. And the ratio of recruits scoring above average on the armed forces qualification test remained at around 60 percent through most of the Clinton years, similar to levels in 1990 and better than any figures from the 1980s.

The situation with some major equipment, however, was less positive. The 1990s “procurement holiday,” in which annual spending on hardware declined from levels around \$100 billion in the mid-1980s to \$50 billion or so under Clinton, was justified given the large



stock of new equipment inherited from Reagan. But the holiday went on too long, leading to problems with mission availability rates for key equipment, most notably aircraft. Equipment was never in such short supply, however, that it compromised battlefield performance or peacetime safety records. And the metrics are by no means unambiguously bad. On the negative side, average air force “mission capable rates” (for all types of airplanes) declined from 80–85 percent during the late Reagan and early George H.W. Bush years to 70–75 percent under Clinton. Yet naval aviation statistics remained generally steady, with mission capable rates averaging around 70 percent throughout the 1990s. Meanwhile, the army’s readiness measures actually improved during the decade, from 70 percent to 80 percent for aviation and from 92 percent to 95 percent for ground equipment.

By far the most troubling trend during the Clinton era was the real and significant decline in troop morale. The Clinton administration downsized the U.S. military substantially: active troops numbered 2.1 million in 1990, 1.8 million in 1993, and 1.4 million by decade’s end. The smaller force faced a slew of post–Cold War commitments that, coupled with mistakes in management, placed a significant strain on military personnel. This, in turn, led to problems in recruitment and retention, particularly for certain specialists such as computer technicians and pilots, who were often lured into the booming civilian economy. Although gaps in units getting ready to deploy were patched over, significant shortfalls remained for those left behind, which further compromised the United States’ ability to quickly meet its two-war requirement.

The morale issue, however, went far beyond the problem of overdeployment alone. Morale remained low throughout the 1990s, even though troops were given more warning of looming deployments and the burden was shared across a wider fraction of the force toward the end of the decade. Cultural factors were also at stake. A common concern was that military promotion was governed by a “zero-defects” mentality, that is, people who avoided mistakes at all costs seemed to do better than those with more talent who were prepared to take risks.

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If George H.W. Bush’s military scores an A, Clinton’s would receive an A- or B+.

This perception was accompanied by a sense that the U.S. military's mindset was increasingly different from that of American society (and especially Bill Clinton), lessening the sense of satisfaction many military personnel drew from their work in service to the nation. Nor were all morale problems solved by the arrival of a new administration. Rather, a new manifestation of military-civilian tension has arisen in the Bush Pentagon, centered on the controversial tenure of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld.

Considering the metrics in aggregate, Clinton's military looks as ready as Reagan's did in the mid-1980s. It does not, however, quite match up to the readiness standards of the military under George H.W. Bush, when the full benefits of the Reagan buildup had been attained but rapid military downsizing had not yet begun.

Thus, although the conventional ranking of the three presidents' military performance is correct, the absolute judgment that Clinton was a poor steward of the armed forces is categorically wrong. Clinton presided over a judicious and inexpensive, yet effective, modernization program. And despite some fraying around the edges, he retained high standards in military personnel and readiness, as proved on the battlefields of Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Drawing the right conclusion about the Clinton military is not just about correcting a popularly held misjudgment, unfair as this enduring slight on Clinton's presidency is. Rather, it is essential that the U.S. public be correctly informed about the sources of military success, since the military's performance forms a key part of the evaluation of an administration's foreign policy. This, in turn, determines not just who the next president will be, but what the United States' future global role will look like. 🌐