RETHINKING THE 600-SHIP NAVY IN LIGHT OF GRAMM–RUDMAN

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The last five years have seen sharp debate over U.S. defense policy and practice: it is difficult to go a day without encountering allegations of some new procurement fiasco, a heated exchange over the need for national security reorganization, or disputes over such technological matters as the practicability of "Star Wars." But at the same time, Congressional and taxpayer support of stronger defenses (witness the investment of some $1.4 trillion between FY82 and FY86) has nonetheless led to badly needed force improvements. With programs well under way to rehabilitate the posture inherited by the Reagan administration, decisions have also been made to expand America's military force structure--to add new Air Force wings, Army divisions, and Navy ships--to enhance deterrence and provide extra flexibility in an emergency.

Unfortunately, new growth plans coincide with the dissipation of support for continuing real defense budget growth. The key determinant here, of course, is a soaring deficit, a problem that can not be remedied overnight. Tighter budgets have put force planners in a bind: to what extent can ambitious expansion plans be retained in such a way that a commitment to more combat units won't come out of the hide of preparedness? The answer to this dilemma depends on the priority one assigns to readiness: many observers would rather have a force ready to fight on short notice, as opposed to the sort of "hollow forces" that existed in the late 1970s--planes that could not fly because of parts shortages, troops not fully qualified in their combat roles, or ships tied up at ports awaiting maintenance.

1This piece was written for The Wall Street Journal.
Each service must now reconsider its priorities in light of new budgetary limitations. Of all our armed services, the Navy faces exceptionally difficult choices, for the Navy is now embarked upon the most ambitious and costly force buildup--one from a 500 ship fleet including 12 big deck carriers to one of 600 ships built around 15 carriers. Since important decisions to add new ships are being fleshed out now, it is important to reconsider the rationale for fleet expansion, and determine whether the larger force is consistent with a more austere budget environment. No one questions the need for a powerful Navy: the issue rather is, simply, which is sounder, a choice between Navy growth or other key force improvement options?

Every year, top U.S. military planners compute the forces the nation needs for a "high confidence" defense posture. Unsurprisingly, the forces resulting from conservative estimates exceed anything that is politically feasible. Facing inevitable "shortfalls," the essence of defense planning becomes a matter of determining where military capabilities can most safely be limited.

Once it entered office, the Reagan administration embarked on a defense buildup, an initiative that came none too soon. U.S. weapons were aging, aircraft and ships were idled for want of parts, research options were forgone, morale was low, and supplies were inadequate. All the while a Soviet buildup continued.

Today, many of these debilities have been corrected. But deficits, entitlement growth, and the rejection of tax increases have now ended steady defense growth. In FY86, budget growth plunged about 7% in real terms, and FY87 promises to be another bleak year. First, there is Gramm-Rudman. And even if this law is judged unconstitutional, Congress has already promised major cuts. Conventional forces could be hardest hit, in light of SDI and other strategic initiatives, a declining pool of 18-year-olds, and an ineluctable increase in the costs of technology over time.

Aggravating this is the fact that in the conventional forces arena so many worthy activities compete for dollars. So far, the Navy leads the field in the conventional forces budget derby. In addition to rehabilitating and modernizing existing forces, the Navy would be
"grown" from a fleet of 500 ships to one boasting 600. The cost to achieve and maintain this enlarged fleet will be enormous over time.

Now, no prudent planner would find fault in principle with 600 ships—or 1,000 for that matter, or a dramatic increase in the number of Air Force wings or Army divisions either. The crucial policy question before the nation is whether, given ever-tightening budgets, the Navy buildup makes good sense compared with other uses—military or civilian—of the considerable budget resources that Navy force growth will require.

Several decisions are reflected in the increment of 100 ships. But by far the most important is expansion of the aircraft carrier force from 12 to 15. Three ships may not seem like much until one throws in as many as 8 combatant escorts for each carrier (some of which themselves cost almost a billion dollars), numerous support vessels for a logistically demanding battle group, 3 wings of aircraft approaching 100 planes each, 6,000 men for each carrier alone—plus overhead and replacement allowances for ships, aircraft, and men in overhaul, training, and the rotation base. The cost to maintain each of these three battle groups over the half-century lifetime of each will run to a minimum of $75 billion (how much more depends on one's allocation of overhead costs and other assumptions). In short, most of the extra 100 ships in the Navy buildup plan—and the bulk of the extra funding that will be required to pay for Navy expansion—is attributable to these three carrier formations.

Thus, a central issue behind Navy expansion concerns the strategic assumptions used to rationalize the three extra carriers. What crucial capability will they provide to American and Allied defense? And is that extra margin of security vital enough to justify first claim on resources that might otherwise be distributed among other worthy programs or public coffers?

Detailed rationales exist for every component of the overall Navy; therefore, one can deduce the strategic aims to be served by more carriers. The 1981 baseline 12-carrier fleet was considered acceptable for meeting minimum requirements for such Navy combat missions as defeating the Soviet Navy, gaining general sea control, providing aerial support of ground forces ashore, and so on. Thus, 3 extra carriers are
recommended because they provide an extra increment of sea-based strike power needed to "take the fight" to the enemy. In other words, a worldwide naval deployment consisting of pairs of, or individual carriers (of a 12-carrier fleet) is seen as inadequate for plans that call for a close-enough approach to enemy lairs to permit devastating attacks. Considering the land-based aircraft and missile threat to just a pair of carriers, so much effort and risk would be involved simply in self-defense that decisive counterattack by the 2 carriers could be impossible. Even if a larger force were sent against one Soviet Navy base, the resulting dilution of carrier forces worldwide would prevent the Navy from accomplishing its basic missions elsewhere.

With the addition of 3 new carriers, it has been argued, the U.S. Navy could deploy to advanced positions much closer to Soviet Navy concentrations and deal out a decisive offensive blow very early in a war. But some critics contend that this accomplishment yields results not worth the costs. Given the dispersal of Soviet naval power, 3 carriers could not win the decisive overall engagement envisioned by some supporters. To take the fight fully to the Soviet Navy, not 3, but maybe 12 new battle groups would have to be formed. According to William Kaufmann, a top former Department of Defense consultant, while the 15-carrier force can do the same jobs as the existing 12-carrier one, it could not fulfill this more ambitious objective.

More important, the allocation of increased resources to an expanded Navy raises the question of overall defense priorities. Former defense official and Ambassador Robert Komer has attempted on many occasions to refocus the overall debate back on basics. The key task before American planners, he's noted, is to prevent the Soviet Army from overrunning key land theaters, most notably Western Europe. A strong Navy is vital to prevent this, but the forces needed to support forward land theaters don't amount to 600 ships. Under some scenarios, the USSR could indeed conquer Europe unless NATO improves its tactical ground and Air Forces—or relies on a potentially unreliable and uncontrollable nuclear deterrent, a prospect many planners are eager to avoid (as are Navy planners who know that a nuclear war at sea would render meaningless the technological superiority of our naval forces). Yet even were the U.S. Navy to instantly achieve absolute control of the
high seas, this accomplishment might not go very far toward rebuffing advancing Soviet armies, whose reinforcements would come over land, not water.  

Hence, we face—as we have since World War II—a fundamental resource tradeoff dilemma. Should we continue with this maritime buildup, or should we invest instead in forces that would more directly secure U.S. and allied objectives in a serious emergency, one in which the Soviet Union would pose a direct invasion threat to adjacent land theaters of great value to us? The question obviously deserves a hard look, especially as the "good times" for defense budgets seem to be vanishing. Careful analysis might bring us to the conclusion that some rather less glamorous undertakings, such as making sure that our forward air and land theater forces could defend key allies, trading partners, and vital raw materials, should truly be the higher priority. Such a conclusion would mean continued modernization of our entire current posture (including our Navy), but it would also call for extra funding for the air support, ammunition, weapons, intelligence means, new technologies, and reserves needed to repel a Soviet land-force juggernaut.

Fortunately, there is still time to come to grips with this fundamental resource problem and redirect what may be an ever-tighter budget into forward land and air defenses. No responsible analyst doubts the need for a powerful, capable, and flexible Navy: the recent

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2Other, more practical aspects of current plans should bear as close a look as strategic questions surrounding the proposed 15-carrier fleet. Maintaining a 20% larger force will drive up payroll, maintenance, operating, and other costs of doing business proportionately. But during times of modest, zero, or negative real defense growth, this may also come at the expense of readiness or the modernization of the forces of other services. Moreover, related planning and scheduling problems can be foreseen which may bedevil future planners. To name three: the costs of the ships intended to accompany and help defend carriers have been growing dramatically; there may be a major shortfall in the number of available escort ships; and, ironically, the Navy shipbuilding plan (which has already described acquisition plans out through FY91) now includes no new carriers—which could lead to an inefficient rush to build several carriers all at once in the 1990s, replacing the oldest flat-tops now serving, as they approach the end of their 45-year life span around the end of the century (it takes as long as 7 years to build one of these 90,000-ton nuclear-powered ships).
events in and around Libya show just how valuable carrier battle groups are. The question is, rather, one of quantity, not quality. That being the case, if tighter budgets seem likely for more than just a year or two, steps to achieve and maintain a 600 ship-fleet should be revised, and plans to enhance our forward air and land defenses (and those of our allies) emphasized instead.