MIT Experts Propose $21 Billion in Defense Cuts

By Michael A. Saglow

Although Defense Secretary Les Aspin PhD '66 has proposed cutting $66 billion from the defense budget between now and the year 2000, a trio of MIT experts contend the United States can safely cut the defense budget by an additional $21 billion over the next seven years.

Jerome B. Wiesner, president emeritus, Kosta Tsipis, principle research scientist, and Phillip Morrison, professor emeritus, detail their proposed cuts in Beyond the Looking Glass: The United States Military in 2000 and Later.

For example, they recommend that the federal government reduce the number of aircraft carriers from 14 to five, which is perhaps the most significant cut in conventional military spending in their plan.

"In the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, we had five aircraft carriers and we surrounded Cuba," Tsipis said. "We blockaded Cuba instantly. We don't need 14 aircraft carriers."

Although 14 aircraft carriers would allow the United States to carry out military operations in several places at once, Tsipis said that the country will not need that kind of capability any time soon.

"In the next 10 years, we won't be doing things all alone. It will be a coalition, like the Gulf War," he said.

Wiesner, Tsipis, and Morrison also feel that the United States should immediately curtail the Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as "Star Wars."

"Space-based defense is impossible," Tsipis insisted. "In 1981 and 1982, before Reagan promoted the idea, people published articles showing that it wouldn't work. The laws of physics won't allow it." He added that this conclusion has been reached by physicists in the government, military, academia, and industry.

Even if the United States could build a system that worked in theory, it would not be practical because even Edward Teller, an outspoken advocate of the Strategic Defense Initiative and the man known as the father of the American hydrogen bomb, stated in 1983 that if the United States were to install SDI, it could be destroyed by the enemy.

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"[SDI] was promoted for psychological reasons," Reagan said. "Now, now, now, children, we're going to have an umbrella to protect you," "Tsipis continued. "The people who are for SDI say, 'Well, it doesn't work now, but you can't say that it won't work in the future,' " he explained, indicating that he finds such arguments unconvincing.

Morrison said he believes the Clinton administration will drop the SDI program. "The circumstances are so much different," he said, adding that the United States worked on the SDI program under the assumption that the primary enemy would be the Soviet Union, but that enemy is now in ruin.

Redirecting people to civilian jobs

Under either Aspin's plan or the one set out by Wiesner, Tsipis, and Morrison, more than one million military-related jobs would be eliminated in the next ten years. Redirecting these unemployed workers to civilian jobs is a major problem that must be faced.

A column by Wiesner and Tsipis that appeared in The New York Times last week said that it costs twice as much to employ someone in the defense sector as it does in a civilian job, according to studies done at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Therefore, by diverting spending from defense, the government could create twice as many jobs per dollar.

According to Tsipis, military jobs are expensive because the work is extremely capital- and equipment-intensive. For example, weapons are made by hand instead of on assembly lines, so it costs more to employ each individual.

Morrison emphasized that because the politics of budget-cutting decisions is extremely complicated and difficult to predict, it is difficult to say how many of their recommendations will be adopted.

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