

## THREE CHEERS FOR REAGAN'S DEFENSE VETO

**R**onald Reagan yesterday vetoed Congress's fiscal 1989 Defense Authorization bill. This... powerfully serves notice that he intends to protect the most important legacy of his Administration during its final months. Congress would be wise to sustain the veto. If Congress tries to "end run" the vetoed legislation by passing a weak Defense Appropriations bill, the President should be prepared to veto this too. He must realize that this year's Defense Authorization and Appropriations Acts will be viewed as his final and definitive statement on defense and as benchmarks by which post-Reagan era defense budgets will be measured.

Reagan's rebuilding of the United States military arsenal is the linchpin of his active and confident foreign policy. Today this policy is bearing fruit: the Soviet Union is pulling back from Afghanistan; Moscow has begun to destroy its powerful SS-20 missiles as part of the INF Treaty; Soviet negotiators have been brought to the bargaining table where they seriously discuss deep cuts in their most dangerous intercontinental missiles. The Administration's willingness to counter the Soviet military buildup and challenge Moscow's global adventures has been the driving force behind these major foreign policy successes.

**Jeopardizing Reagan Achievements.** The Defense Authorization bill would have jeopardized the foundation of military strength upon which these Reagan achievements rest. Reagan Administration policies have ushered in an era of great promise in relations with the Soviet Union. This then is no time to signal Moscow that the U.S. is preparing to return to the failed policies of an earlier era, in which Soviet leaders were rewarded for talk, not deeds.

It is the President's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) that more than anything else has brought the Soviet Union to the bargaining table on terms favorable to Western security. The vetoed Defense Authorization bill would have gutted the SDI program. The \$3.7 billion the bill would have allowed for SDI research, development, and testing is \$2.7 billion less than former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's initial request for fiscal 1989. It is even \$800 million less than the Administration's revised request, the minimum required to keep SDI alive, according to SDI Director Lt. General James Abrahamson.

A particularly damaging provision would have slashed funding for space-based interceptors — orbiting satellites armed with homing rockets capable of destroying Soviet missiles shortly after launch. The space-based interceptor has been a target for SDI opponents in Congress because a successful test would demonstrate beyond doubt that SDI space technology can work. With sufficient funding, the U.S. could test an interceptor in space by the early 1990s. Under funding levels proposed in the Defense Authorization bill, however, such a test would be

pushed well into the next century. The President is rightly concerned about congressional efforts to scuttle SDI on the brink of success.

**Unilateral Concessions.** A hastily written provision of the authorization bill would have banned the Pentagon from "depressed trajectory" testing of ballistic missiles, an attack technique enabling missiles to strike their targets more quickly. Another provision would have required the U.S. to remove two *Poseidon* ballistic missile submarines from active duty. Such provisions, along with SDI cuts, would have been unilateral concessions to Moscow, depriving U.S. START negotiators of crucial leverage in their efforts to forge an arms reduction treaty.

Modernization of America's strategic nuclear forces has been a principal objective of Reagan since he took office. The authorization bill would have cut 25 percent of the funding requested by the Administration for strategic modernization. These cuts would have jeopardized the deployment of mobile *Peacekeeper* ICBMs, needed to decrease the vulnerability of U.S. missiles to Soviet attack. The Soviet Union, unrestricted by the U.S. Congress, has deployed two mobile ICBMs, the rail-mobile SS-24 and road-mobile SS-25. Cuts in the mobile *Peacekeeper* program would undermine strategic stability by improving Soviet first-strike capabilities. Like other restrictive provisions of the Defense Authorization bill, these cuts also would have weakened the position of U.S. arms control negotiators.

By sustaining the President's laudable veto of the Defense Authorization Bill, Congress can strengthen U.S. defenses, support U.S. arms control efforts, and send a message to Moscow that the U.S. has not backed away from a policy of peace through strength.

**Daring Another Veto.** Reagan now must be ready to veto the defense appropriations bill. Congressional defense budgeting is a two-step process: the authorization bill is the first step; next, Congress must pass an appropriations bill. Opponents of the President's defense budget may try an "end run" around a vetoed authorization bill by passing an appropriations bill containing the same damaging provisions as the vetoed authorization. Liberal lawmakers may assume that Reagan will not dare veto a bill appropriating funds for all Pentagon operations — particularly late in the legislative year when members of Congress will be anxious to get back home to campaign for reelection.

Yet for all the reasons that Reagan vetoed the Defense Authorization bill, he should be prepared to veto an unacceptable Defense Appropriations bill. If necessary, he even should veto a "continuing resolution" to force Congress's hand. Congressional opponents will use scare tactics, arguing inaccurately that such action completely would shut down the military. In fact, existing emergency powers enable the President to maintain essential military operations while the fate of the appropriations bill is decided. The Defense Appropriations bill will be one of Ronald Reagan's last major confrontations with his liberal opponents in Congress. Nothing less than the legacy of his Administration is at stake.

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For further information:

Thomas M. Humbert, "The Ultimate Veto: Dare Reagan Block a Continuing Resolution?" *Heritage Foundation Issue Bulletin* No. 73, November 17, 1981.

Kim R. Holmes, "Why the U.S. Needs SDI," *The Heritage Lectures* No. 122 (1987).