

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION: THE U.S. EXPERIENCE

By Lawrence Korb



The United States has renounced the use of chemical and biological weapons and has reduced both its conventional and nuclear forces substantially since the end of the Cold War, says Korb. However, as long as some nations continue to try to develop weapons of mass destruction, “the United States will need some form of nuclear deterrent,” he says. Korb is Director of Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. He served as Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration.

During the Cold War, from 1950 through 1990, the United States maintained a large standing military establishment principally to contain Soviet Communist expansionism. The effort was ultimately very successful. Not only did the Soviet empire collapse in the late 1980s, but by 1991 the Soviet Union itself had disintegrated.

However, this effort was extremely costly in both blood and treasure. Not only did some 100,000 Americans lose their lives fighting Soviet proxies in North Korea and Vietnam, but another 50,000 service men and women died in accidents as the U.S. military tried to maintain the state of readiness necessary to blunt any Soviet expansion attempts through military force.

In today’s dollars, the United States spent an average of \$320 billion a year on defense or a total of about \$13 trillion to win the Cold War. For four decades, spending on national security consumed about eight percent of the nation’s economic output (Gross Domestic Product or GDP) and 30 percent of all federal government expenditures.

The Cold War also meant that about 25 million Americans spent time in the military. Until 1973, some 500,000 men a year were compelled to serve their country because of the military draft. For the last 17 years of the Cold War, the United States maintained its forces on an all-volunteer basis. The costs in economic and human terms of maintaining a military that averaged about 2.5 million people a year on active duty were considerable.

Seventy percent of military spending from 1950 through 1990 was on conventional forces. The remaining 30 percent, or nearly \$4 trillion, was spent on developing and maintaining the nuclear arsenal. This figure does not include some \$320 billion in estimated future costs for storing and disposing of more than five decades’ worth of accumulated toxic and radioactive wastes, and another \$20 billion for dismantling nuclear weapons systems and disposing of surplus nuclear materials. These costs, plus an additional \$2 billion to treat persons contaminated by nuclear bomb production, are still to be paid. For example, the U.S. government estimates that 26,000 federal workers were exposed to beryllium (a metallic element used in nuclear bombs) at federal nuclear sites and will be aided by the government if they develop berylliosis, an allergic reaction that can lead to permanent scarring of the lungs.

The size and scope of the U.S. nuclear weapons’ program provoked considerable debate in this country during the Cold War. Many wanted to outlaw these weapons altogether on moral grounds. Others objected to the size of the U.S. arsenal, which grew to 15,000 strategic weapons in the mid-1970s. Still others tried to stop specific delivery systems, like the B-1 bomber and the MX missile, from being funded. Presidents responded to this public pressure in a number of ways. President Eisenhower declared a moratorium on testing; President Kennedy negotiated a test ban treaty with the Soviets; President Nixon agreed to limits on the number of nuclear warheads; and Presidents Reagan and Bush negotiated actual reductions in the number of strategic nuclear weapons.

The United States maintained the large and expensive nuclear arsenal for two reasons. First, these strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, which by 1990 still numbered in excess of 10,000, deterred the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent China, from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons. Second, they enabled the United States and its allies to contain the Soviet empire without maintaining a conventional force as large as the Soviet's. For example, in 1985, the United States had only 2.1 million people on active duty while the Soviet Union had 5.3 million. The United States made sure that this strategy would be effective by never embracing the no-first use of nuclear weapons policy proposed by the Soviet Union and China.

The ability of the United States to prevail in the Cold War was a direct result of its reliance on nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union not only outspent the United States on defense, but because it had a much smaller economy, the Soviet Union had to devote a much larger share of its GDP to national security. Some estimates put the share of Soviet GDP consumed by defense at 30 percent. This meant that the Soviets had far fewer resources to put into their civilian economy and that by the 1980s their economic growth had stagnated to such an extent that they had to give up their empire and allow the Soviet Union itself to break up.

For the first half of the Cold War, the United States also maintained an arsenal of biological and chemical weapons for deterrence purposes. But, beginning in the Nixon administration, the U.S. government renounced their use under any circumstances and began to dismantle them. In addition, the United States entered into international conventions that banned their production.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has reduced both its conventional and nuclear forces substantially. In 1990, more than two million Americans were serving on active duty. Today, there are slightly more than 1.3 million, a 30 percent decline. The number of active Army divisions has dropped by 44 percent from 18 to 10, the number of combatant ships by 32 percent from 312 to 212, and the number of active fighter wings by 46 percent from 24 to 13.

The United States also reduced its nuclear arsenal considerably. In 1990, there were about 10,000 U.S. land- and sea-based warheads placed on some 1,560 long-range missiles. Today the total has dropped to some 7,500 warheads on 982 missiles. In that same time frame, the U.S. Air Force cut the number of heavy bombers capable of delivering nuclear bombs from 324 to 115. Within the next decade, if the Russian Duma ratifies the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), the U.S. arsenal will have 836 missiles with about 3,500 warheads, a 65 percent reduction in the number of warheads from 1990 levels.

These force reductions since the end of the Cold War have allowed the United States to reduce the level of defense spending as well as the portion of its economic resources devoted to national security. In 1990, the U.S. defense budget, in today's dollars, was \$375 billion and consumed six percent of the nation's GDP and 20 percent of its federal budget. Defense spending has fallen by \$100 billion or 27 percent, and now consumes only 3 percent of the nation's economic output and 15 percent of its federal budget.

But the end of the Cold War did not result in world peace or the end of regional confrontation. The breakup of the Soviet empire allowed long simmering ethnic conflicts to break out into the open and permitted other nations to try to fill the vacuum left by the Soviet Union's demise. As the world's remaining military and economic superpower, the United States has become the reluctant sheriff trying to maintain stability in the international arena.

Throughout the past decade, war has raged between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. India detonated a nuclear bomb and Pakistan followed suit. China allegedly stole nuclear weapon's technology from the United States and exploded a neutron bomb. Without its Soviet patron, North Korea found it necessary to develop nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. The Russians themselves, starved for cash, have sold nuclear and missile technology to Iran, and so, too, have the North Koreans. The U.S. government estimates Iran will have a nuclear weapon in five years. Finally a number of other rogue states, like Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan, are trying to develop weapons of mass destruction. To maintain order in this unstable international system,

the United States has been active on the military and diplomatic fronts. The Department of Defense still maintains 250,000 troops around the world, and in the past decade, it has conducted military operations in the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, and the Taiwan straits. Moreover, absent ratification of START II by the Russian Duma, the Pentagon has kept 7,500 strategic nuclear weapons in its arsenal at the annual cost of \$30 billion. Moreover, even if Russia should ratify START II and move on to START III, the United States still plans to maintain 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons in its arsenal indefinitely as a deterrent.

This unstable international environment has meant that the United States has had to halt the decline in defense spending that occurred in the 1990s. Beginning with its fiscal year 2000 budget, the Pentagon expects defense spending to increase in real terms for the first time since 1985. By the year 2005, U.S. defense spending will be back to 90 percent of its Cold War level.

The United States has also been active on the diplomatic front. President Clinton has not only asked the Duma to ratify START II, but has proposed that both sides unilaterally move to a START III Treaty, which would reduce U.S. and Russian strategic weapons from 3,500 to 2,000. In addition, the Clinton administration, working with other nations, has extended the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty indefinitely, ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, submitted to the Senate the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and provided oil and peaceful nuclear reactors to North Korea on condition that Pyongyang give up its weapons-grade nuclear material. The United States has repeatedly attacked Iraq's chemical and biological production facilities and warned Iraq to expect strong retaliation if it uses these weapons of mass destruction.

However, the U.S. diplomatic efforts to fight the spread of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons are still unwieldy and overlapping. A panel set up by the Congress and headed by former Director of Central Intelligence John Deutch recently recommended that the White House appoint a national coordinator to

direct a streamlined defense against this grave threat to the United States.

With the end of the Cold War and the decline of defense spending, the U.S. economy grew rapidly during the 1990s. By the end of the decade, the U.S. GDP exceeded \$8 trillion, unemployment was at 4.3 percent, and inflation was below 2 percent. Maintaining stability in the international system, while not cheap, will not place as much of a burden on the U.S. economy or the American people as the Cold War did.

There will, of course, continue to be debates about how much is enough for defense. There are many, like former head of the Strategic Air Command, General Lee Butler, and former commander of the space command and commander of the air component of the Gulf War, General Charles Horner, who argue that the United States should eliminate nuclear weapons altogether. These Air Force generals feel that precision-guided U.S. conventional weapons are now so powerful that they can deter use of weapons of mass destruction by themselves. Moreover, they argue that by eliminating nuclear weapons, the United States can seize the moral high ground in the nonproliferation debate.

Others, like Admiral Stansfield Turner, former head of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), argue that the United States needs no more than 1,000 strategic nuclear weapons for deterrence and should adopt a no-first use policy. This would not only free up resources (about \$15 billion a year) but would enhance the U.S. moral position in the debate about weapons of mass destruction.

But, like the debates during the Cold War, these debates will not lead to the elimination of all U.S. nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, some nations have tried and will continue to try to develop weapons of mass destruction, and as long as they do, the United States will need some form of nuclear deterrent, particularly since it has given up its chemical and biological weapons. ©