
SECURITY ASSISTANCE PERSPECTIVES

U.S. Can't Be World's Policeman Nor Prisoner of World Events

By

William S. Cohen

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On the eve of his confirmation, William S. Cohen told Congress his priorities as the 20th secretary of defense would be maintaining quality personnel, combat readiness and modernizing the force for the 21st century.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, it is with humility that I appear before you today as President Clinton's nominee to be secretary of defense.

For nearly two decades, I was privileged to be involved in national security matters as a senator and member of your committee and during that time, to have worked with six secretaries of defense. Through that experience, I gained a sense of the enormous responsibilities of the position. But since Dec. 5, [1996], I have acquired a new appreciation of the gravity of these responsibilities and am deeply humbled by the president's trust in me.

President Clinton's nomination of me to be his secretary of defense is, I believe, a clear signal of his commitment to the principle that the security of our nation is not, and should not be, a partisan matter, a principle that I have sought to uphold throughout my public career. Among my most satisfying experiences as a legislator were those when I was able to help to achieve consensus for strong, coherent, sustainable defense policies to protect and promote America's global interests.

It is with pride that I recall legislative initiatives in which I have been involved with members of this committee and other members of Congress: the Montgomery GI Bill; the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act; the creation of the Special Operations Command; numerous bills to reform government acquisition and management; and bills to strengthen intelligence oversight and to overhaul counterintelligence programs. Each of these was the product of bipartisan cooperation, and each was much more effective because of it.

As the president emphasized in his inaugural address, such cooperation has also been critical in maintaining American leadership in the world. The construction of our postwar alliances would not have been possible without bipartisan cooperation, and no less is required of us as we adapt those alliances to the post-Cold War world and undertake other measures to shape this new era that lies before us.

While there always will be room for legitimate debate on national security issues, partisanship and parochialism should occupy no seat at the table of our deliberations whether within the executive branch, the services or the Congress. We must remain mindful that at the end of every debate stand our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who look to us for leadership, not legerdemain, for support, not political strife.

For while the threat of nuclear holocaust has been significantly reduced, the world remains a very unsettled and dangerous place. Hostile regimes and instability threaten our interests in key regions such as Southwest Asia and Northeast Asia. Instability, nationalism, and ethnic tensions pose dangers in Europe. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction threaten our interests, our forces, and even our homeland. And the threats of terrorism, international organized crime and drug trafficking remain unabated. Moreover, we need not revisit ancient history to remind ourselves that dangerous threats can arise suddenly and unpredictably.

Politically, economically and technologically the world is changing at an unprecedented and sometimes alarming pace. Technology is miniaturizing the globe, binding our destiny ever more closely to that of our allies and economic partners around the world.

This works to our advantage as we seek to promote free markets and the principles of democracy. Yet it increases the degree to which we are affected by developments overseas. Even if we so desired, we could not insulate ourselves from the forces sweeping the globe.

While we are not and cannot become the world's policeman, neither can we become a prisoner of world events, isolated and tucked safely away in a continental cocoon.

With this in mind, the president and Secretary [of Defense William J.] Perry have pursued national security policies designed not merely to meet this changing environment but to shape it in ways favorable to our interests. They can be proud of their accomplishments in ending the legacy of the Cold War by reducing the nuclear threat from the former Soviet Union, building the Partnership for Peace and what Secretary Perry has termed a pragmatic partnership with Russia, and setting NATO on the course toward enlargement, as well as strengthening our alliance with Japan and developing military-to-military ties with China.

If confirmed, I intend to continue these efforts and build upon them as our focus shifts from dealing with the end of one era to shaping the next era.

After a century in which two world wars ignited in the heart of Europe and a Cold War divided it for more than four decades, we approach a new century with a real prospect for finally overcoming the division of Europe. Before President Clinton's second term is complete, NATO will have admitted its first round of new members and the Partnership for Peace program will have been further enhanced. The pragmatic partnership with Russia will be pursued through the effort to negotiate a NATO-Russia charter, strengthened U.S.-Russian military-to-military cooperation, continuation of Cooperative Threat Reduction activities, and action on our arms control agenda.

I intend to give new focus to our security relations in the Asia-Pacific region. As the center of gravity of the world economy has shifted to the Pacific, our increasing economic integration with Asia's dynamic economies has created enormous opportunities for American businesses and workers. Beyond the near-term threat from North Korea, our interests are potentially jeopardized by the danger of instability and rivalry among major regional powers. Maintaining our in-theater force presence and expanding our security engagement in the region are indispensable to preserving stability, gaining diplomatic and economic cooperation and protecting our ever growing interests there.

And I will continue the efforts of my predecessors to protect our interests in Southwest Asia, whose energy resources will also remain critical to the world economy. We must remain vigilant to the threats that both Iraq and Iran pose.

Getting it right on these key components of the international security agenda—Europe, Russia, East Asia and Southwest Asia—is critical to protecting and promoting America's interests in the new century and will facilitate our efforts in other areas as well. Getting it right depends not only on pursuing the proper policies, but backing those policies up with military strength.

The United States today has the finest military in our nation's history, the finest the world has ever seen.

My first priority is to continue to attract and retain the high quality of personnel necessary to preserve U.S. military superiority. The increasing complexity of technology, the quickening pace of warfare and growing unpredictability of the international scene require that our people be more adaptable and agile than ever.

Ensuring high levels of readiness must also be a priority so that our forces are able to respond to crises whenever and wherever necessary. I would add that I share Secretary Perry's view that a key element of readiness is the quality of our personnel and therefore the quality of life we provide them and their families, including their pay, compensation, housing, and medical benefits.

A third priority is modernization of the force, which is essential to our military readiness of tomorrow. The massive reduction in force structure following the end of the Cold War allowed us to terminate or defer a multitude of programs within acceptable risks. But this trend must now be reversed.

Also of priority will be modernizing the support elements of DoD, in which I include such matters as making continued progress in acquisition reform, addressing questions of remaining excess infrastructure, and adopting best business practices.

Achieving a proper match of strategy, programs and resources to meet our security needs of the present and the future poses a major challenge. This is now under review by the Defense Department as it conducts the Quadrennial Defense Review and will also be reviewed by the National Defense Panel.

I take the QDR process seriously and if confirmed, will expect all elements of the department to take it equally seriously. We should be under no illusions. The reductions of recent years have exhausted all the easy options, and if done properly, the QDR will present difficult choices. If confirmed, I anticipate coming back to this committee to seek support for the tough but necessary decisions I will make based on the recommendations of the QDR.

As we go through this process, we must not lose sight of the fact that its purpose is to ensure that our armed forces can fight and win the nation's wars.

Advising the president on the use of force is the gravest responsibility a secretary of defense holds. As a senator, I was mindful of this when I traveled to the Saudi desert to meet with troops preparing to reverse Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and more recently when I visited our brave men and women serving in Bosnia and had the privilege of pinning the Purple Heart on a valiant young soldier from Maine. As secretary-designate, I pledge to you and our men and women in uniform to do my very best to merit this most solemn trust.

For as the president has said, while we should not fear to use force wisely, the courage, loyalty and willingness of our men and women in uniform to put their lives at risk is a national treasure that should never be taken for granted. And when our forces are sent to fight, clear objectives must be set to which we are firmly committed and which we have the means to achieve decisively. These requirements are as valid for humanitarian and other operations other than war as they are for major contingencies.

Let me also point out that our military forces are performing their mission not just when they rush in to deal with a crisis—they are performing equally important missions on a daily basis.

When our ships patrol strategic waters, our aircraft fly distant skies, and our soldiers deploy on exercises, they are not merely on call in the event something happens. By those very actions, something is happening: They are influencing the views and decisions of foreign countries, be they friends in need of assurance or foes in need of deterrence. Our forces in their daily operations are shaping the world, not merely waiting to respond to the crises of the moment.

Mr. Chairman, there are two more points I wish to make. Since my nomination, some have noted that I have disagreed with the president on several national security issues and that being the case, have asked whether I can serve the president effectively in the future.

I have spent the last quarter century working in Congress with both those with whom I have agreed and those with whom I have disagreed, attempting to do so in a constructive fashion to produce positive results. I believe my record is one of bridging differences—not papering them over, but building consensus behind reasonable and responsible compromises.

I would also note that uniformity of opinion within an administration is not an imperative nor even an ideal to be sought. To the president's credit, I believe he wants a team of strong-minded advisers who together will be able to provide him with the best possible guidance. If I am confirmed, I am certain that on occasion there will be differences of views amongst us as there are in all administrations—which should be settled behind closed doors. And I have no doubt that we will be able to work together with a degree of comity and cooperation that rivals or exceeds that of any administration I have observed over the last quarter century.

On specific issues that have been cited, I have no reservations about my ability to work effectively within the administration.

In the case of missile defense, for example, I was one of four members of this committee tasked by the chairman to find a consensus that could pass the Congress and be signed into law. Sens. [John] Warner, [Carl] Levin, [Sam] Nunn and I worked long and hard with other members and with the administration. We managed to narrow the philosophical and political differences that existed and in the end the legislation crafted was supported by the Congress and the administration and is now being implemented in what I believe to be a technologically sound manner.

On the North Korean nuclear agreement, I was indeed skeptical of North Korea's commitment to adhere to the agreed framework. But the undeniable fact is that the agreement has worked. North Korea's nuclear weapons program has been frozen, while its economy continues to spiral downward.

On matters involving the use of force, while I have advocated greater consultation with Congress, I have refused to undercut the president once his decisions were made. I was among those, for example, who worked with Sens. [Robert] Dole and [John] McCain on the resolution

supporting our forces deployed into Bosnia. I believe in consultation as a genuine and ongoing process, and I believe that this was a factor in the president's selection of me to serve in his cabinet.

I mention this, Mr. Chairman, because I am convinced that President Clinton is determined to transcend party lines and labels in formulating his national security policies and that he recognizes the importance of hearing the voices of those who might differ with him or other advisers so that he can be assured that the actions he takes are well-reasoned and grounded, and not simply the product of predisposition.

I would be remiss, Mr. Chairman, if I failed to pay special tribute to Secretary Perry. In my view, he is one of the most able public servants ever to have served the government of the United States. He has embodied nonpartisanship in pursuit of our national security interests. His integrity and patriotism, coupled with his brilliance and calm demeanor, combined to produce a leader at Defense who achieved the arguably unique distinction of being both effective and beloved. He was always careful and precise regarding the use of force; he developed a pragmatic relationship with the Russian government, strengthened our security relationship with Japan, and made real strides in the long process of implementing acquisition reform. His service has been in the finest traditions of this country, and I believe he has established a high standard for all of his successors.

In the conclusion to his book, *On the Origins of War*, historian Donald Kagan states:

A persistent and repeated error throughout history has been the failure to understand that the preservation of peace requires active effort, planning, the expenditure of resources, and sacrifice, just as war does. In the modern world, especially, the sense that peace is natural and war an aberration has led to a failure in peacetime to consider the possibility of another war, which in turn, has prevented the efforts needed to preserve the peace.

The president recognizes that the preservation of peace requires active efforts, planning and sacrifice. I am deeply honored that he has asked me to serve as his secretary of defense to assist him in the planning and effort that will be required.

The objectives I have outlined represent substantial challenges, but our economy is strong, our nation is at peace, and the Department of Defense enjoys enormous reservoirs of talent and ability in its military and civilian employees. Working together on behalf of the American people, we can and will meet these challenges.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate having the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering any questions you or other members of the committee may have.