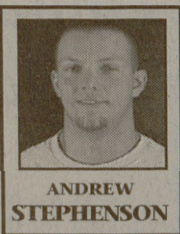


OPINION

THE BATTALION

Ready or not

American military cutbacks unwise; need for a prepared army growing larger



ANDREW STEPHENSON

The necessary magnitude of the military has been debated throughout the history of the United States. During times of peace, the size and effectiveness of the military is invariably reduced. The need for a strong military is questioned when there is not a war, but America has been caught off guard before because times of peace introduced desires for the nation to remain isolated and out of the world's affairs. While today's world politics have changed from years past, the power of the U.S. military has remained relatively strong since World War II. In recent years, however, it has begun to take a rather abrupt decline.

A Pentagon report to Congress released at the end of August said the military is facing training problems, personnel shortages and aging equipment. The report included a study of the military's readiness, which is judged against a theoretical baseline of fighting two wars at the same time. According to the report, if the country were to fight two major conflicts at the same time, it would run a risk of increased casualties because of shortfalls in the ability to move, supply and protect troops.

The report cited several areas of "strategic concern" that were related to the ability of the military to build up forces in the areas where war had broken out. It also dealt with whether the military could initiate a counteroffensive, such as shortfalls in mobility and logistics in dealing with terrorists and weapons of mass destruction.

There were also specific assessments for each service. The Army has shortages in some critical enlistment skills and at the rank of captain, causing personnel readiness concerns. In the Navy, shortfalls would occur with aviation equipment if air wings and carriers were forced to support two major conflicts. The Air Force is facing shortages in many critical job skills, as well as shortages of spare parts and skill level mismatches in many personnel areas, hurting its ability to effectively train.

The truth about today's military must be faced. America's armed forces are one-third to one-half smaller since the end of the Cold War, but deployments have increased 300 percent since 1991. During the conflict in Kosovo, the consequences of asking the military to do more were evident in the shortages in everything from cruise missiles to carri-



JOE PEDEN/THE BATTALION

ers. Defense analyst Dr. John Hillen, an Army veteran of Desert Storm, said, "Readiness problems manifest themselves slowly over time and get fixed only slowly and deliberately. The idea that the Army's well-publicized readiness problems from 1998 to late 1999 are suddenly and magically fixed is simply not true. The Army has used the sorts of accounting tricks that have plagued readiness reporting for 30 years in order to suddenly become ready. Language such as [that used in responses to lack of readiness] is code for 'We could not meet the standard, so we lowered the bar.'"

A Washington Times article from March 28 reports, "The U.S. military was sent on an unprecedented 48 overseas missions in the 1990s. By contrast, the military was sent on only 20 such missions in the 15 years between the U.S. exit from Vietnam and the end of the Cold War." At this same time, "The active duty force was shrunk by 800,000 troops, from 2.2 million to 1.4 million — a 40 percent reduction. The Army was cut from 18 to 10 divisions; the Navy went from 567 ships to just over 300; and the Air Force lost almost half of its 24 fighter wings." Another article from Aug. 28 reported, "The De-

fense budget has now dropped to about 2.9 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (down from 4.2 percent of GDP in 1992) — a depth not reached since before Pearl Harbor."

One of the major consequences of the actions has been that many National Guard members, so-called "weekend warriors," have been forced to assume an active service role. The National Guard reserves have been called up only five times since the end of the Cold War. Four of these instances were authorized by Clinton since 1994, while the fifth was during the Gulf War. These absences of civilians place great strains on both employers and employees, as those who are reserves must engage in active service.

Charles Cragin, assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, said at a Department of Defense conference, "In this decade, we downsized this force by a million men and women — 700,000 out of the active components and 300,000 out of the reserve components. Then, all of a sudden, we said, 'Hey, we're a million fewer, but now we've got more missions.'" In 1900, when President George Bush called up the reserves for Desert Storm, newspapers throughout America ran banner headlines. Cragin said, "If we were to do that today every time the president called up the reserves, we would have that headline indelibly imprinted in every newspaper every single day."

The threats that face America are very real, and having the strongest military in the world goes a long way toward ensuring the safety of this country. However, due to cutbacks and the post-Cold War "draw down," the military readiness of American armed forces has taken a serious hit. The world's best military should not be having problems with out-of-date equipment or with a lack of qualified personnel.

The solution to these problems is simple; the necessary funding must be restored to the military budget. Despite the claims of many that increased military spending would do nothing but increase taxes, in truth it would be nothing but good for America. The armed forces buy American, increasing available jobs, and putting more money back into the American economy. This country would then be able to feel secure as it enters this new century, knowing that it will be protected by a fighting force that has been given every chance to succeed, not one that has been rendered ineffective.

Andrew Stephenson is a sophomore environmental design major.

Mail Call

Gun rights not debatable, safety measures unnecessary

In response to Nicholas Roznovsky's Nov. 18 column.

You really showed your ignorance of the Constitution in your article, Mr. Roznovsky. It is ridiculous to compare the right to keep and bear arms to the right to drive a car. Please show me where in the Constitution we have a guaranteed right to drive.

You point out Washington, D.C., and Chicago as places that require some form of gun registration. You must have forgotten the fact that these cities' violent crime rate with firearms has gone up drastically since their gun control measures took effect.

Gun registration and licensing are the first steps toward confiscation. The people of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union probably wish they did not register their guns, because the governments knew exactly where to go to take the guns away. Instead, the people of those two countries were forced to live under the most horrific regimes in this century. Why? Because they had no way to overthrow them.

The Constitution clearly states the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." When you force people to take classes or

pay for licenses, you are infringing upon their rights. It clearly shows the ignorance of the left when they think gun registration will lead to lower crime.

Here is a little hint for you — the criminals will not register their guns. Only the law abiding citizens will. Here is a better way to deal with gun safety: Gun safety needs to be taught at home. Parents need to stop relying on the government for everything and become more accountable in their own homes.

But as the saying goes, "You can have my gun when you pry it out of my cold, dead hands."

James Drew
Class of '01

The Battalion encourages letters to the editor. Letters must be 300 words or less and include the author's name, class and phone number.

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Past Petroleum

United States should consider human rights over oil

Although countries like Iraq and Yugoslavia dominated foreign policy discussions during this year's election, the next president of the United States may face his first foreign policy showdown with a nation a little closer to home.

The country in question is the South American oil-exporting nation of Venezuela. Its president, Hugo Chavez, has taken an authoritarian stance that has increased since his re-election in July. Unless America wants a South American Castro armed with the ability to withhold oil, Washington must act now.

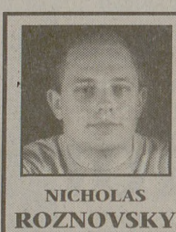
Chavez first took office in February 1999. A former army paratrooper, Chavez led an unsuccessful coup attempt in 1992. He reached office by capturing the hearts of the electorate with his promise to reignite the spirit of patriot Simon Bolivar in the nation's government. Many Venezuelans are now dubious about another of his promises — keeping the country from becoming a military state.

Since his rise to power, Chavez has wasted little time in appointing current and retired military officers to prominent posts once held exclusively by civilians, such as governorships, legislative seats and cabinet posts.

In late October, Chavez, or "El Comandante" appointed Gen. Guacaipuro Lameda to head Venezuela's state-owned oil company. To take his new position, Lameda must leave his current job as director of the National Budget Office. Chavez has already named his successor, also an active-duty general.

Chavez's most recent initiative has increased the military's influence even further. More than 500 schools have been created on military bases throughout the country to provide Venezuela's poor with meals and education. These schools, which Chavez calls his Bolivarian schools, are run by military officers dressed in combat fatigues. Critics of Chavez see the new schools as an overt attempt to brainwash the nation's children.

One of Venezuela's leading historians, Guillermo Moron, told The New York Times



NICHOLAS ROZNOVSKY

that Chavez's Bolivarian schools policy "could be very dangerous because it opens the way to ideological indoctrination and militarization."

For its part, the government responds that it is merely trying to provide economically disadvantaged children an education with the tools it has readily available.

"The press says the government is militarizing the classroom," said Col. Marco Fernandez, principal of one of the largest Bolivarian schools, "but that is not what is happening here at all."

It is surprising that the press has said anything at all, given the blatant disregard and outright contempt Chavez displays toward it. Over the past few months, Chavez has become increasingly critical of the Venezuelan media, going as far as to warn reporters to "be careful" during nationally televised speeches.

The United States cannot allow every regime with an oil well to tyrannize its population. At some point, the United States must put people before oil.

Chavez often publicly criticizes the print media while monopolizing Venezuelan television, on which he often speaks for hours at a time. In the first two weeks of February alone, Chavez spent more than nine hours in front of the television cameras and the nation. His subjects vary from the highly partisan, such as attacks on his opponents, to the completely frivolous, like the meaning of love and anecdotes about his distant relatives.

Members of Venezuela's fledgling opposition party are outraged by Chavez's recent call for a national referendum to grant him the power to disband the nation's labor unions. Opponents say the referendum is unconstitutional and the most blatant sign that Chavez is trying to establish a full-scale dictatorship.

International labor organizations such as the Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the International Labor Organization

have agreed, filing protests with various international bodies.

Chavez's response to their objections left little room for diplomatic interpretation. "What do I care about this international organization from who knows where?" he said at a rally.

The most disturbing development in Chavez's reign over Venezuela has been his development of diplomatic ties with a number of America's most virulent enemies. During a 10-day world tour in August, Chavez stopped in Libya and Iraq. Chavez, in defiance of U.S. wishes, became the first elected head of state to visit Iraq since the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

It does not appear that Chavez is overly concerned with the United States, even though the United States is Venezuela's key trading partner. During his stay in Libya, Chavez denounced the U.S. 1986 bombing of Tripoli as a "criminal act." Under his orders, Venezuela has denied U.S. anti-drug planes permission to fly over the country for reconnaissance missions. He also recently announced plans to send oil to Cuba in defiance of the nearly 40-year-old U.S. blockade of the communist stronghold.

Chavez's alliance with Castro should come as no surprise, since the two played baseball together during Chavez's visit to Havana. Chavez does not attempt to hide his respect for Castro, a man he has praised as an inspiration on many occasions. Chavez also openly preaches the teaching of Che Guevara, the brains behind the Cuban communist revolutionary movement.

It has become painfully clear that Chavez does not care about whether the United States accepts him. He no doubt feels that Venezuela's position as a major oil provider to the United States grants him some immunity while he emulates the authoritarian dictators he holds in such esteem.

If he wants to join them, he deserves all the benefits of membership, including the staunch opposition of the U.S. government. Washington should not allow the country's hunger for oil to blind it to the injustices in Venezuela.

The United States cannot allow every regime with an oil well to tyrannize its population. At some point, the United States must put people before oil.

Nicholas Roznovsky is a senior political science major.

