

The Military Build-Up Under President Reagan

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President Ronald Reagan's ideas on fiscal restraint didn't apply to the U.S. military. In the eight years preceding Reagan's inauguration, the defense budget averaged \$116 billion. In the years under Reagan, the average more than doubled to \$263 billion.

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Transcript

The Military Build-Up Under President Reagan

BRYANT GUMBEL, co-host:

This morning as we continue our weeklong look at the Reagan revolution, we turn our attention towards the defense policy. Monday's resignation of Navy Secretary James Webb reveals that the national dispute over just how much is enough rages even among the President's own people. A far cry from the early Reagan days, when spending for military strength was a dominate theme of the Reagan campaign.

President RONALD REAGAN: I think it is a number one priority that this country build back its defense capability to the place that we don't have to be afraid anymore.

GUMBEL: When it came to defense, the Reagan revolution didn't come cheap. Ronald Reagan's ideas on fiscal restraint did not apply to defense. In the 8 peacetime years that preceded Reagan's inauguration, the defense budget averaged \$116 billion. In the years since, that average has more than doubled to 263 billion, all in the name of modernization.

CASPAR WEINBERGER (Former Secretary of Defense): We had to modernize the whole strategic deterrent all three legs of that of the triad. We had to do a great deal of Congressional strengthening. Most of all we had to try to deal with morale and personnel problems. People were leaving in droves, and so this was a large series of problems. And I was always sort of amused, though not very, when people kept saying you don't have any priorities. The trouble was, we had to have several priorities, and we had to try to fulfill them all at once because things were in, very frankly, in very bad shape.

GUMBEL: Was it as bad as Cap Weinberger says it was?

HENRY KISSINGER (Former Secretary of State): I think the situation was bad in the sense that a decade and a half of domestic divisions had made a political football of many foreign policy issues and of

defense, also. And therefore, a significant re-armament effort by America was important. Whether it was quite as bad, campaign rhetoric tends always to be a little dramatic.

Pres. REAGAN: America's defense strength is at its lowest ebb in a generation.

GUMBEL: However necessary any particular elements of his defense budget may have been, Caspar Weinberger got most of what he and the President wanted. The 1.9 trillion he wrestled from Congress bought a lot of hardware and a lot of manpower.

FRED FRANCIS, reporting:

This is Fred Francis at the Pentagon. The Reagan-Weinberger legacy is that they restored pride in the uniform. They made the all-volunteer force a success. The 2 million service men and women are no longer high school dropouts or the unemployed. Their induction tests scores have soared. And this smarter GI is more than ready for war. Unfortunately, the GI has not been well led.

In Lebanon, poor policy decisions and a bloated chain of command got 261 men killed. Grenada embarrassed the Pentagon brass but the snafu's there were covered up in top-secret reports. Even the attack on Libya was so poorly planned, that Kaddafi survived, though his zeal for terrorism waned. And in the Persian Gulf, 37 sailors died before anyone understood American policy or the dangers there. But even with those black marks most of the world knows that America quit being a paper tiger these past 7 years.

JIM MIKLASZEWSKI, reporting:

This is Jim Miklaszewski at the Pentagon. It's said that Caspar Weinberger and the Reagan Administration never met a weapons system they didn't like. The same goes for the military. The services gorged themselves on gold-plated weapons and billions of dollars were wasted. They produced a B-1 bomber that still doesn't work properly. The DIVAD Air Defense System cancelled because it didn't work at all. And guidance problems still plague the MX nuclear missile. Nevertheless, advances have been made in force modernization, nuclear and conventional. Political problems aside, 'star wars' research promises new advances in technology. Experts generally agree the US remains ahead of the Soviets in the overall quality of their weapons, and that Reagan administrators will leave the military in better shape than which they found it.

GUMBEL: Despite the many billions spent on defense during the Reagan years, a study commissioned by the President still finds us ill prepared to deal most effectively for the future that will emphasize small, limited conflicts, and speed over size. Beyond that, expenditures are already being curtailed. The President's latest defense request, his last, is actually down to 282 billion. In real terms, that means the end of his visions of a 600-ship Navy, the loss of three air fighter wings, the demise of more than a dozen new weapons systems, and a personnel reduction of over 30,000 military people.

It's worth noting that in London at this very moment, Caspar Weinberger is being knighted, honored for the manner in which he ran the Pentagon. Tomorrow our series on the Reagan revolution looks at economic policy.