

**The U.S. Military: Still the Best?\***  
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**Dr. Joseph J. Collins, CSIS Project Director**

As the campaign heats up, claims about the status of our military have become political footballs. Recently, in response to Republican attacks about readiness, Vice President Gore, the Secretary of Defense, and the last two chairmen of the Joint Chiefs have countered that our military is strong and still the best in the world. Both republican and democrat claims have merit, but reality paints a more complex picture than either party has presented.

The U.S. military is "best" almost by definition: we outspend our most powerful rivals and our strongest allies, combined. The record clearly shows that no nation on earth can stand against us, a fact made clear by our performance in Kosovo that made even the most advanced European allies look pale by comparison.

On another level, however, while the claim of being the best is valid, it is also irrelevant. As the right arm of the sole superpower, U.S. military prowess can only be measured against the current and future missions assigned to it by the national command authority. These missions now include combat readiness, as well as peacekeeping, humanitarian operations, and worldwide presence. The emergence of new problems --- like terrorism mated with weapons of mass destruction --- suggests an even more diverse set of missions in the future.

Every administration must balance three things: the number of troops, ships, and formations; the amount of budgetary resources; and the missions it assigns the Armed Forces. This is where we have run into serious difficulty.

Under the pressure of its many missions, the American military --- while still the best in the world -- is wearing thin. When you reduce the force by more than a third, cut the budget forty percent, and then increase the amount of military operations by 300 percent, you are bound to create turmoil inside the military. If you then fund this policy by shorting modernization and re-capitalization, you mortgage the future and leave the bill to the next administration.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) recently completed a study of military culture and organizational climate in the Armed Forces, based in part on a survey of over 12,000 people in the Armed Forces. We found a force that sees itself as underpaid, overworked, and under-resourced. As many a wag concluded, for the past decade we have had ten pounds of missions but only seven pounds of resources.

According to the men and women that we surveyed, the most pressing problems of the force are: inadequate pay and benefits, an inability to balance work and family life, a shortage of people and resources in their units, and various problems associated with new recruits and recruit training. CSIS analysts also found evidence of a widespread set of leadership problems, no doubt connected in part to stress on the force.

Despite remarkably strong values and dedication, people in the Armed Forces indicated that they have an inadequate level of service satisfaction. When asked about morale in their units, only 26 percent of those surveyed characterized it as high. We heard time and again that the Armed Forces has already lost a disproportionate share of its best young officers and non-commissioned officers. On top of these people problems, despite high readiness spending and herculean efforts in the field, the readiness of much our Reagan-era equipment stock has declined.

Inadequate funding for modernization over the last decade will ensure that today's readiness problems are passed on to the next President. While the current administration has finally --- five years after it was called for --- achieved its 60 billion dollar per year modernization goal, that level is nowhere near adequate. Most experts believe that the modernization accounts require at least an additional 20 billion dollars per year.

The costs of new weapons systems, deferred maintenance, and national missile defense will hit the Armed Forces like a tidal wave. Many experts see drastic personnel reductions as the only way to keep it afloat. If this happens, however, the pressure from our not-easily-terminated overseas commitments will further increase stress on people in the Armed Forces.

Barring an unlikely, radical change in strategy, the next president in all likelihood will have to spend more on personnel, readiness, and modernization. This will not be possible within current budget levels. Neither new weapons technologies nor management efficiencies will alleviate the need for more spending. The real choice is more money, or more rust along with lower morale.

In addition to spending more money, curing what ails the military will require a set of tough decisions. Our next chief executive with the help of the Congress will have to cut major weapons programs, consistently rely more on our allies, discipline our appetite for overseas commitments, and cut excess bases.

All of these measures are easily listed, devilishly difficult to accomplish, and absolutely necessary, if we are to maintain the best military in the world, as well as one equal to the missions that it has been assigned.

\*This op-ed is published here as it was prepared, not as it was published in the Boston Globe.

Joseph J. Collins, a retired Army colonel, is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington D.C. think tank.

***Dr. Joseph J. Collins is the director of CSIS's centerwide project on homeland defense. He solicits comments and input on this report or the associated recommendations. He can be contacted at [jcollins@csis.org](mailto:jcollins@csis.org) or 202-775-3170.***