

CONNECTION

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EDITOR'S MEMO

Asking national leaders to expound on the nation's priorities can be as risky as it is rewarding. The reason is that priorities—and the assumptions they're based on—can change quickly. And they have.

When we approached members of New England's congressional delegation about submitting commentaries for this issue of *Connection*, presumably few if any U.S. leaders could have foreseen an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, much less a massive U.S. military buildup in response.

But by late August, 75,000 U.S. soldiers and sailors had been dispatched to the Persian Gulf. Finding a resolution of some sort to the Middle East crisis clearly had become Washington's No. 1 priority.

Our timing nonetheless was fortunate, for lawmakers, it seems, were in an especially visionary mood during the months leading up to the Iraqi invasion. The commentaries in this issue reflect a Congress—and a nation—mentally divvying up a "peace dividend." Granted, with the federal deficit soaring past \$169 billion and the savings and loan fiasco adding to the country's budget problems, the end of the Cold War might not pay hard currency. But the country's vigor would be redeployed.

Spending on domestic programs wouldn't grow significantly, maybe not at all. But intellectual resources would be unleashed to attack the federal budget deficit, clean up the environment, beef up education and aggressively encourage economic development. The great minds and industrial capacity of America—long focused on producing more accurate, more destructive weapons—would now be applied to civilian products.

All this may still happen. Certainly, the events in the Middle East do not diminish New England's or the nation's needs on these fronts. But readers may consider how the priorities set forth on these pages will be influenced by dramatic increases at the gas pump and a military operation estimated to cost well in excess of \$1 billion a month.

Beyond these immediate economic implications lies another question worth bearing in mind: To what degree have military ventures in the past robbed vigor from America's other "wars" against such enemies as poverty and racial injustice?

The distinguished contributors to this issue of *Connection* have indeed offered the vision of an America rechanneling its energies to tackle the closely related and long-neglected problems of poor educational achievement and lagging economic competitiveness.

The events in the Middle East will not lessen their commitment to these causes. A reasonable fear, however, is that vigor works something like money. When much of it is diverted to prepare for a confrontation with foreign armies, less is available to prepare for competition with foreign companies. □

John O. Harney is editor of Connection.