



# President's Message

Maj Gen John L. France (ret.), President, NGAUS

## The Honorable Les Aspin 1937-1995: An Appreciation

The untimely death of former Secretary of Defense Les Aspin robs the United States of one of its best strategic thinkers on defense and national security. Until he suffered a stroke a few days before his death at age 56, Aspin had continued his pursuit of institutional reforms of both Defense and the U.S. intelligence system in the wake of the Cold War.

He was one of the first and the most influential national leaders to recognize the implications of the Cold War's end. He realized the United States needed to refocus its thinking away from a large-standing Army and the hair-trigger response system we had devised over 40-plus years. Aspin advocated a more responsible military and national-security apparatus.

Aspin rose to prominence in the middle 1970s as a junior member of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) with an encyclopedic knowledge of defense. Considered a bomb-thrower in those days, he had the propensity for tweaking his Southern conservative-Democrat elders. His early years on the HASC were under the chairmanships of such Democratic barons as L. Mendel Rivers (D-South Carolina), F. Edward Hebert (D-Louisiana) and later Melvin Price (D-Illinois). In 1985, Aspin ultimately ousted Price, who retired from Congress two years later. Aspin had made an early mark after he chaired the military manpower and personnel subcommittee two years earlier.

When President Clinton was elected to

the presidency, Aspin was appointed secretary of Defense. Conventional political wisdom in Washington suggests that Aspin's leadership of DoD was not his finest contribution to the nation. With the possible exception of his personal style and personality, a closer examination of Aspin's 11 months at the Pentagon might suggest otherwise. Consider the three major controversies that usually are cited:

• **Gays in the military.** We suspect we will never know what Aspin's personal views were on this issue. It seems likely to us that

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had Aspin been consulted, he would have advised the president-elect to put the issue on the back burner as a "lose-lose" situation or as something that could be addressed, if at all, later on. However, that's not what happened. Just two weeks after the 1992 election, the president-elect announced his intentions with little or no consultation with his soon-to-be national-security staff.

Thus, when he became SecDef later, Aspin was presented with a *fait accompli*-type mission. Aspin negotiated with Senator Sam Nunn (D-Georgia), then chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.

• **Somalia.** The U.S. mission in Somalia began during the Bush administration; President Clinton inherited it. Aspin was blamed for barring the deployment of tanks and helicopter gunships. Although it suffers from a bit of 20-20 hindsight, the fact is the whole Somalia episode suffered from mission creep, which

started as a purely humanitarian mission and the forces that were deployed reflected that. As time wore on, the UN leadership decided to take sides in a civil war. As it turned out, U.S. troops were not well-armed nor well-equipped for such an offensive mission. Aspin took the blame.

• **Style.** It likely is true that Aspin's personality and style were better suited to chairing a House committee than in chairing discussion briefings in the Pentagon. Aspin had nearly total command of the details of defense issues and national strategy. What was not known was his tendency to circle endlessly and not come to closure. He drove the uniformed military and the DoD bureaucracy wild, both institutions valued schedules, suspenses and regular status processes rather than the intellectual combat where Aspin grew up and thrived.

We in the Guard owe Secretary Aspin a lot. As Representative John Murtha (D-Pennsylvania), noted Aspin was among the strongest supporters of the Guard and Reserve in the pre- and post-Cold War era. He insisted, as part of his Bottom-Up Review (BUR), on full utilization of the Guard and Reserve, which followed his exhaustive study of force structure in his term as HASC chairman and his well-known "Option C." Actually, the BUR conclusions and Option C are similar to the Offsite Agreement was concluded and announced on his watch, something which green-suiteders particularly owe him.

After his departure from the Pentagon in January 1994, Aspin continued to serve his nation as a member of the Rules and Missions Commission of the U.S. House of Representatives and as chairman of the presidential committee studying U.S. intelligence agencies. But even when he was Secretary of Defense, his health was precarious, never good.

Les Aspin was a great intellect, but most of all he was a good man and strong believer in the Guard. He will be missed.

Cover:

A C-130 of the Maryland Air National Guard's 135th Airlift Group lands at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, to play a key role in BIG DROP II, the largest U.S. military airdrop since D-Day. Photo by SSgt David L. Wilcoxson, 1st CTCS/DOA. Cover design by Dennis and Sackett Design.

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# NATIONAL GUARD

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Air National Guard units from several states carried 2,500 paratroopers and their equipment in what was called the largest airdrop exercise since D-Day. In a joint operation with Reserve and active-duty units, members of the 82d Airborne Division were delivered on time and on target. Building on lessons learned from the aborted invasion of Haiti, BIG DROP II got off the ground "without a hitch."

**'Mighty Mo' Runs Aground—Again** 28  
Continuing to live up to its infamous reputation, the Missouri River once again flooded its banks just two years after reeking havoc throughout the Midwest. More than 100 Missouri National Guard members were activated, responding quickly to the emergency and returning to help some of the same victims they had rescued during the last tragic flood. In this issue, they talk about what it was like to be there—again.

**Building Bridges . . . and Friendships** 32  
Engineers from the Wisconsin and Louisiana Army National Guard met some friendly natives during a recent trip to Panama, where they built foot bridges in remote villages. Some of the Guayami Indians they met showed their appreciation by pitching in on the work effort. Although the training proved rewarding for many of the soldiers, a couple of them were left feeling a bit 'stung' by the experience.

